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DROUGHT AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA AND THE EFFORT TO OVERCOME IT

GIRMA AMARE*

INTRODUCTION

The drought and famine in Ethiopia, which once again claimed the attention of the international community in October 1984, are phenomena neither confined to Ethiopia nor brief in duration. Ethiopia has been plagued by these problems for decades, if not centuries, as, indeed, are many regions in Africa today.

This continent-wide natural calamity does not promise to be a transient phenomenon; it is the ominous tip to a major global ecological iceberg.

According to ecological scientists, Africa has been undergoing a drought and gradual desertification process. Since 1968, the second largest land mass on our planet has seen its desert spread from the Sahel region in West Africa toward the Horn of Africa, and proceed down to the southern parts of the continent due to recurrent drought.

According to estimates, the Sahara desert is currently spreading southward by about 10 kilometers per annum. Such a rapid loss of hitherto fertile land to the sands of the Sahara is posing a danger to virtually all forms of life in many parts of Africa. This serious climatic change is accompanied by the attendant agricultural and economic ramifications.

During the drought of 1984-85, some 35 African countries were affected by the drought in different degrees of severity, leading to food shortages affecting nearly 200 million people.

In this tragic cycle of drought and famine, the situation in Ethiopia is accentuated by its rugged topography, rapid population increase, alarming rate of deforestation, soil erosion, and centuries of primitive agricultural life on its cool and temperate highlands—the center of its civilization and history.

It is therefore appropriate to explain, albeit briefly, the interaction of these unique features, and their cumulative impact on the recurrent drought and famine in the country.

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I. GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

As the most elevated nation in Northeast Africa, Ethiopia has almost forty per cent of its territory situated over more than 1,500 meters above sea level. It is difficult to find a region in Africa comparable to Ethiopia in its topographic diversity. The deepest depressions to be found on the continent lie alongside towering mountain ranges.

The Ethiopian highlands occupy a major part of the country sloping downward towards the west and south, with the major river valleys following the same direction. The Rift Valley crosses all of Ethiopia and forms the northern section of the East African Rift Zone.

Almost all of Ethiopia is situated within the sub-equatorial zone, and the climate is typically one of wet "kremt" (the rainy season which runs from June to September) and dry "bega" (September to May). The mountainous terrain also has a considerable effect on the country's climate, which is often influenced by the climate in the neighboring Arabian peninsula. Solar radiation in Ethiopia averages 300-400 cal./sq. cm. The country covers a considerable area from north to south, but the air temperature in different areas depends largely on the altitude. This topographic variation therefore causes considerable fluctuation in the average annual temperature. The country's precipitation rate and sub-equatorial location serve to level off annual temperature variations.

In the "tibbi" (spring) and "bega" (summer) seasons stretching from October to March, western equatorial winds shift southward across the equator. Most of Ethiopia has tropical air streaming from the high-pressure area in Arabia. Thus precipitation in the Ethiopian highlands abruptly decreases and, from November to February, many regions have no rain for one to three months.

In sub-equatorial regions, with their guaranteed temperature levels, the total amount, rate and seasonal prevalence of precipitation, humidity, and aridness are of great importance to agriculture. In Ethiopian areas with annual precipitation levels of less than 800 mm, nomadic and seminomadic stock-breeding is of major importance. Some pockets of irrigated land are found, with the hoe being the principal implement. In areas with annual precipitation levels exceeding 800 mm, and particularly in those areas with precipitation levels in excess of 1,000 mm, mixed agriculture, involving plough cultivation and stock-breeding, is dominant.

Other important climatic factors are the nature and rate

of precipitation. During the rainy season, dry intervals may last up to ten days, and occasional showers may occur in the dry season. Even more serious are the protracted shifts in the annual precipitation pattern and sizable variations in the total amount, leading to drought, or, on the contrary, to the rotting of crops because of unseasonable excess moisture.

About half of Ethiopia's territory is semi-arid, and therefore excluded from economic activity because of water shortage or difficulties in efficiently using the existing water resources. Traditional utilization of water is growing with the increase in population, and also as a result of the gradual migration of rural inhabitants to places situated closer to water sources following the eradication of local malaria foci.

Soil erosion has reached exceedingly dangerous levels, and is characteristic of the highland regions, where there are almost no remaining forestlands. As a result of soil erosion, the amount of land suitable for cultivation or pastures is decreasing from year to year. About six per cent of the cultivated land is presumed to be subject to constant and intense erosion. It has been calculated that up to 500 million tons of soil are lost annually on account of erosion, and about one-fifth of this is washed away by rivers, only to be deposited a considerable distance beyond the country's national frontiers.

Evergreen mountain forests formerly covered a large part of the Ethiopian highlands and spread over wide areas in the elevated sections of the adjacent plateaus. There are several indications that until the last sixty to eighty years, about forty per cent of the country was covered with dense forests. As is common in poor developing countries, forest destruction has resulted from agricultural expansion, shifting cultivation, increasing demand for wood as fuel, construction needs, increasing numbers of livestock, and the misuse of forest resources, as well as fire hazards. At present, the forest cover of the country is estimated to be about 3.5 %. The total forest destruction caused by shifting cultivation, fire, dust, overutilization, and other factors is estimated to be about 200,000 hectares a year.

The Ethiopian government is now giving priority to the conservation of soil and water resources, as well as reforestation and other developments. As a result, some 577,600 hectares of farmland have been terraced in recent years through "food for work" programs in the drought prone regions of the north.

According to the 1984 census, the total population of Ethiopia is 42,019,418. The great majority of the population

lives in the highland regions, and the population density averages 92 persons per square kilometer. On the other hand, most of the lowland regions are sparsely populated, with population densities not exceeding 20-30 persons per square kilometer.

II. RECURRENCE OF DROUGHT

It has been established by historians that drought has been recurring in Ethiopia in 13-14 year cycles for some 600 years. It seems, however, that this cyclical pattern has accelerated in the first half of the present century by almost fifty percent. According to a recent study of weather behavior, over the past thirty to forty years drought conditions recurred every 7 to 8 years and continued for 2 to 3 years. There is little doubt that rapid environmental deterioration was partly responsible for the acceleration of the cycle.¹

Most of the drought and famine conditions in Ethiopia have been taking place in the highland regions. These regions have been centers of power since antiquity, with plough agriculture practiced here since before the birth of Christ. Coupled with a backward system of land use, the land has been steadily depleted. Unregulated human activity decimated the forest resources of the region, ultimately leading to the denudation of the land's vegetal cover, further intensifying the process of soil erosion and land degradation.

The early stages of modernization in the 20th century did not substantially transform the condition of the peasant. When famines broke out consecutively, the peasant had no way of combatting them, except to passively await his slow, agonizing death or to migrate to the more ecologically stable regions of the country.

Population migration in the wake or anticipation of major drought conditions has also been cyclical in the last century of Ethiopian history. The influx has mostly been to the regions in the south of the country where agricultural potentials are much better, in addition to the fact that these regions have been, and still are, sparsely populated. This trend of southward migration has continued uninterrupted to the present day.

Between 1957 and 1974, a series of famines broke out in

1. ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA, SCIENTIFIC ROUND-TABLE ON CLIMATIC SITUATION AND DROUGHT IN AFRICA (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, February, 1984).

the wake of recurrent droughts. In the northern regions of Tigray and Eritrea, a devastating famine was first reported in 1958, but the former government was unwilling to disclose it until it assumed serious proportion in 1959. Government sources at the time estimated the affected population at one million. By 1961, about one hundred thousand persons died, while thousands of the able-bodied population migrated to other parts of the country on their own.

Another large-scale famine was reported in the Wag-Lasta "awraja" (province) of the Wollo administration region in 1966. This catastrophe, just like the previous one, was hidden by the government from Ethiopians living in other parts of the country, as well as the international community at large. This famine is generally regarded as the forerunner of the major famine of 1972-74. Government authorities had been informed of the disaster as early as 1965 by local authorities, but virtually nothing was done to combat it until two years later. Nor was anything done to publicize the problem or appeal for international assistance. The situation thus got worse, and the death toll continued to mount. The ghastly famine of 1972-74 broke out in all its devastating fury before the people had recovered from the consequences of its predecessors.

It had been estimated that 200,000 people perished in the famine of 1972-74, but this figure seems to be an under-estimation. At any rate, a recent study on famine indicates that between the years 1957 and 1974 some 700,000 to 1.1 million persons died.²

There are no overall estimates of livestock casualties. The partial surveys that have been made do, however, help to give some idea about the total loss. From 1973 to 1974, it was estimated that 93% of the sheep, 90% of the camels, 60% of the donkeys, and 95% of the mules died in five provinces. In another report it was stated that 66% of the cattle, 11% of the sheep and goats, and 72% of the camels died in a space of six months between September 1974 and February 1975. If this much was lost in such a short period, one could easily imagine the extent of the damage over the last several decades.

2. RRC, *THE CHALLENGES OF DROUGHT* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1985).

III. ORGANIZED RESPONSE TO DROUGHT AND FAMINE

Upon its assumption of power in 1974, the Provisional Military Government inherited a large famine-stricken population, an extremely weak infrastructure, a subsistence agriculture, and a tiny manufacturing sector. It was therefore evident that nothing short of a radical structural change, particularly in the rural sector, could transform such a terribly backward situation. The first and most significant step toward this goal was the introduction of land reform, which reinstated land to the tiller—its legitimate owner. Another important measure taken at the time was the establishment of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), set up specifically with the aim of coordinating relief assistance and rehabilitating the drought victims in the country. Thus, through the instrumentality of the RRC, a new institutional approach was launched to combat the causes of drought and hunger in the country more effectively.

Meanwhile, the government continued to strengthen and expand the institutional capacity of the RRC to more efficiently deal with the situation. Accordingly, Proclamation No. 93 of 1974 formally established the RRC; clearly defining its duties and responsibilities for the first time. The government funds and personnel allocated to the RRC were assigned partly through transfer of funds and personnel from other government organizations, and partly through the recruitment of new personnel.

The primary duty of the government became the mitigation and prevention of the effects of drought and famine, insofar as this was possible. The government mobilized the public to actively participate in the effort to combat the effects of the drought.

Apart from the normal budgetary allocations, the government also appropriated a special relief fund to meet the high cost of operation. Over Birr 400 million (about 193 million U.S. dollars) was allocated for the RRC between the last quarter of 1974 and 1983. Duty-free rights were granted on all relief commodities destined for drought victims, and the RRC was given priority in the use of port facilities. Further, each ministry and government agency was instructed to give the utmost priority to mitigating the disastrous effects of the drought. The new proclamation empowered the RRC to make use of both moveable and immovable government property for its relief operations. Government-owned and operated transport systems, including defense vehicles, planes,

and amphibious crafts, were put at the service of the RRC, as were all government storage facilities. The RRC was also given the right to deploy government personnel in order to provide services when the need arose. A massive transfer of additional manpower was made on a temporary basis to fill the gap created by the absence of permanent employees.

The result of this mass mobilization by the government was effective in forestalling the devastation of the calamity. Death due to lack of food was virtually ended.

IV. SHORT AND LONG TERM PROGRAMS

The RRC, with the assistance of other government organizations, started rehabilitation programs alongside relief operations. Thousands of water wells were sunk, clinics and health centers were set up, mobile medical services were established, grain seeds, plough oxen, and other agricultural implements, pesticides and insecticides were distributed to the affected population. Quick farms were boosted by the RRC, in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, to produce relief grain.

The public contribution, in both relief and ameliorative measures, was considerable, generating some Birr 175.8 million (about 85 million U.S. dollars) during the last ten years.

In addition to the provision of funds and material assistance, the participation of the people in actual field operations was impressive, as exhibited by their full involvement in feeding programs, providing cooked food at temporary shelters, and distributing grain at key sites in the affected areas.

The joint effort of the government and the people to mitigate the effects of the drought was supplemented by the assistance of the international community. International organizations, bilateral sources and voluntary agencies, as well as humanitarian organizations, have been making commendable efforts to contain the famine situation in the country.

Alongside these ongoing activities, the RRC had to undertake rehabilitation projects with the ultimate objective of enabling the drought victims to become self-sufficient citizens.

Rehabilitation is not a new social experiment. It is a proven way to bring new hope to men, women and children displaced by the vagaries of nature. In encouraging the victims of drought and famine to move to better endowed parts of their country, Ethiopia is drawing from the solid experience accumulated over the last ten years. In the past, some

40 thousand households had been rehabilitated at 83 sites in different parts of Ethiopia. These sites have now grown into relatively viable farming communities. It is no overstatement that these households are today enjoying a better standard of rural life. One may add that the experience of these households has become a beacon of hope, as those peasants from Tigray and Wollo tread on the heels of their predecessors to the lush regions of south and southwestern Ethiopia.

V. DROUGHT AND FAMINE—1984

The recent drought and famine situation in Ethiopia is the cumulative result of three years of successive rain failure in the country. In 1984, the country recorded the lowest precipitation levels in the last twenty years.

The failure of the rains, and, in some cases, their complete absence in several areas of the country in 1983, resulted in the loss of crops and domestic animals. In order to withstand the situation, many were compelled to sell their assets, which, in turn, resulted in a poor state of readiness to face the protracted drought in 1984. 1983 saw an overall shortage in national food production due to drought during the "meher," or main harvest. This shortfall was massively aggravated by further rain failure during the "belg" or "small rains" season of February and March, during 1984. The absence of the "belg" rains affected all regions of the country and led to delays in agricultural activity. The planting of March crops was delayed until May.

For favorable harvests to be obtained, it would have been necessary for the 1984 "kremt" rains to continue until October. This did not happen. When compared to normal rainfall patterns, 1983-84 saw a decline of between 60%-100%. Evaporation rates increased, underground water levels dropped, and rivers and wells dried up in most of the drought-prone regions of the country. The absence of the 1984 "kremt" rains also meant a lack of grazing areas for livestock, which began to die in the hundreds of thousands, and those that managed to survive were too weak to be used for farming activities. People had to travel long distances to find water. Others had to abandon their residence and migrate toward towns, villages, and government relief centers in search of assistance. As people lost their resistance due to a lack of adequate nourishment, disease started to rear its ugly head. Children obviously were the most susceptible, with skin diseases, eye diseases, measles, and diarrhea-related com-

plaints much in evidence. The drought raged with barbaric ferocity, particularly in the traditional, overused and heavily populated highland areas, such as Eritrea, Tigrai, Wollo, and northern Shoa, where nearly 9 million people were facing famine.

The drought was also harsh on the nomadic sector of the population, which depend mainly upon their herds for survival. There was not enough water or pasture for a large pastoral population. Ethiopian returnees from neighboring countries (mainly from the Djibouti Republic and Somalia) also had to face the grim consequences of the drought.

Currently, some 2.5 million people continue to face the cumulative effect of the droughts, and continue to need assistance. There is little prospect that the situation will improve significantly until the national effort is supplemented by the international community in a more lasting manner.

The RRC had to respond to these enormous challenges. Through its 190 food distribution centers and 21 shelters, a gigantic life-saving operation was undertaken by the RRC. These measures, however, could not fully offset the spreading famine. In spite of this unparalleled undertaking, it has not been easy to contain the drought and its numerous negative effects.

The humanitarian gesture of the international community is laudable, and the Ethiopian people and government are grateful for this demonstration of human solidarity. It should be noted, however, that a fish cannot be a substitute for a fishing net. A lasting solution needs to be worked out and implemented if millions of Ethiopian peasants are not to face a new round of famine and charity handouts. This is the basis for the resettlement program of the government.

It has, however, been a source of surprise and concern that some governments and segments of the media have had the audacity to label this most humane option "forceful eviction," a "human rights violation" and even a "holocaust."

VI. THE IMPERATIVE OF RESETTLEMENT

It has to be noted that the resettlement program was initiated in the aftermath of the current severe drought. As a consequence of the drought, thousands of victims from Wollo, Tigrai, and Northern Shoa had started to migrate spontaneously, on foot, to the distant southwestern parts of country, with no specific destination, in search of reliable climate and fertile land.

A study carried out by World Bank experts, led by Dr. L. Brown, concluded as early as 1973 that the over-utilized and over-populated areas of Tigray and Wollo could not sustain the population, and that a massive resettlement program was imperative. This study was corroborated by the continuous drought that took place in the north starting in 1973, which resulted in the recent spontaneous migration of thousands of people, and made the present organized resettlement program mandatory. Following the recommendation of this study, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) carried out a land use study for settlement in the southwestern parts of the country. Assossa, one of the large areas being used for settlement in Wellega, is an area selected on the basis of the FAO study.³

Consistent with the previous FAO land use criteria, a multi-disciplinary team identified the new areas on the basis of the following criteria:

1. Suitability for human and animal habitation
2. Adequate and reliable rainfall
3. Fertile soil for production purposes
4. Sufficient water for human and animal consumption
5. Accessibility; and
6. Availability of sufficient unscattered and un-occupied land

As for the implementation of the program, it has been given the highest national priority, and has been placed under the guidance of the Politbureau of the Workers Party of Ethiopia. Several ministries and government agencies are jointly responsible for its effective implementation. The major ministries and organizations participating directly in these programs include the Ministries of Public Health, Agriculture, Construction, Water Resources Commission, and the RRC. The National Committee for Central Planning closely monitors the planning and coordination of the activities carried out by the different ministries and agencies. In addition, mass organizations and resources have been mobilized to augment the government's all-out effort. A classical example is the construction of over 70,000 dwelling units built by peasant associations for settlers. University students from different disciplines and their lecturers have also actively partici-

3. RRC; (included in an explanatory note circulated by RRC of Ethiopia to PVO's and the media in 1985).

pated in the construction of social services, stores, health facilities, schools, and watering points. Students have also assisted in teaching the settlers basic education and hygiene. In this manner, the government has mobilized all its available material and human resources for the settlement program to the extent possible.

Concerning the method used to decide who should be selected for settlement, the following criteria have been strictly adhered to by the government:

- A. Willingness of heads of families to be settled
- B. Willingness of heads of families to bring along their dependents
- C. Willingness of heads of families to be engaged in agriculture; and
- D. Physical fitness, e.g. age, health status, etc.

A committee comprised of peasant association leaders, local administrators, and the RRC staff has been established at sub-district levels to assess and ascertain that the registered settlers meet the outlined criteria.

After registration, the settlers are transported to focal dispatching points, where screening is carried out by the joint staff of the RRC, Public Health, and the Red Cross, to ensure that the selection has been carried out in accordance with the set criteria. Those passing the screening process are transported by bus and air to their respective settlement areas. Transit stations are established at several points to provide settlers with shelter, food, medical and sanitary services, and other necessities.

By and large, the settlers are provided with ready-made dwelling units built by community effort when they arrive at settlement sites, which they improve in time, as they see fit. The few who are not provided with ready-made dwelling units are temporarily accommodated in shelters for a maximum of two weeks, during which time they are assisted to build their own dwelling units. They are also provided with grain and supplementary food, clothing, blankets, and utensils by the RRC until their first harvest. Similarly, the Ministry of Public Health has mobilized and deployed its staff to provide health services at the various settlement sites. The Ministry of Education has also assigned its teachers to conduct basic education programs at all sites.

While the settlers are allotted two hectares (about five acres) of agricultural land during the first year, the Ministries of Agriculture and State Farms have been given the responsi-

bility of clearing and ploughing one hectare per household. During the second year the settler is expected to work on this cleared and ploughed hectare of land with his own means of production, while the two ministries will clear and plough the remaining hectare for the household. By the end of the second year, the settler is expected to operate the entire two hectares on his own. In addition, each household is allotted 2,000 square meters of land for home gardening. To ensure the immediate utilization of this lot, each settler is provided with the necessary hand tools and seeds upon arrival. To this end, over 1.4 million different pieces of hand tools, such as hoes, shovels, sickles, and axes have been distributed to the settlers. The settlers have started to partially meet their food requirements from their home gardens already cultivated. Other services provided to the settlers include warehouses and flour mills.

By 1985, over 185,000 family heads, totaling 555,000 individuals with their dependents, have been moved and resettled in the Illubabor, Wellega, Gojjam, Keffa, and Gonder administrative regions. Contrary to the politically motivated reports that have been circulating in some Western capitals, no individual has been moved from Eritrea for settlement. As for Tigrai, the number of people that are settled comprise only 21% of the total settlement population, while 64% are from Wollo, 14% from Shoa, and 1% from Gonder.

To sum up, the settlement program was launched on account of the pressing need for a durable solution to the plight of drought victims of the north in the absence of any other viable alternative. In spite of their constant criticism, those who have opposed the government's settlement programs have not come up with any viable alternative to date.

In the light of this reality, the government is determined to continue to seek a lasting solution by mobilizing all of the material and human resources at its disposal. The fact that Ethiopia is among the least developed countries with limited resources is obvious. The international donor community, Western governments, and UN special agencies have been invited to observe the process and assess the needs of the settlement programs. Those that have visited the settlement sites, such as EEC Parliamentarians, FAO, WFP representatives, and representatives of other bodies, have realized the objective necessity of the program.

While extreme care has been taken to ensure the unity of families during the resettlement process, the RRC, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Red Cross, has launched a fam-

ily tracing and reunification program in those cases where separation of families by the abandonment of children or dispersal in a desperate survival effort may have occurred.

It is obvious that in a drought situation where close to 10 million people have been affected, thousands of untimely deaths can take place. No one can deny the toll on human life caused by the recent natural calamity. It is acknowledged throughout the world that Ethiopia's current drought has been one of the worst in recent years.

As it stands, life expectancy in Ethiopia and other least developed countries is low. The high mortality rate in general, and that of children in particular, is well known. Needless to say, the human lives already claimed by the famine, as well as its residual impact, are tragic realities currently being addressed. Some quarters have, however, attempted to relate the death toll of the drought and other natural mortality to the settlement program. This is a deliberate distortion of facts designed to undermine the growing support the settlement program is gaining from the international community.

Positive support for the settlement program has come from members of the international community, including the Italian Government, the Irish Concern, the Lutheran World Federation, Menschen Für Menschen, and others who are actively supporting these schemes.

The Ethiopian government will continue to do the best it can, in cooperation with all well-meaning humanitarian organizations and governments, to overcome the drought and famine situation that has been plaguing the country for so many years.

CONCLUSION

This, then, is a brief sketch of the problem of drought and famine in one country and what is being done about it.

It should be underlined in closing, however, that drought and desertification is increasingly a regional, and, indeed, a global problem, as was outlined at the outset, and should be addressed as such.

We are all cohabitants of a small and fragile planet. Our fate is tied. We should, therefore, adopt a world-wide approach to the challenges that confront humanity. Just as the dangers of nuclear annihilation and the pollution of our atmosphere demand our collective attention, so must ecological disruption justly claim our cooperative action to combat the drought-famine complex in the world.

At this age of scientific and technological advances, it seems incomprehensible that a large part of the world should still be at the mercy of the caprice of nature.

It is equally ironic and morally indefensible that while there is today so much food surplus and enormous productive capacity in one corner of the planet, people should go hungry or starve to death in another.

Time for sober reflection is, indeed, overdue.