



Water: Again a scarce commodity in Ethiopia

A Bitter Harvest

There is a disturbing sense of *deja vu* as newspapers report the mounting figures of Ethiopians at renewed risk of starvation and of food aid tonnages urgently required to keep them alive. It was only three years ago that our television screens carried the same pictures of the drought-stricken, war-torn north of Ethiopia and of Bob Geldof's original pleas to 'feed the world'.

Charity appeals including the farmers' 1984 'Send a tonne to Africa' are also being relaunched on familiar lines: 'Stop another march of death' urges one advertisement. The crassly worded headline of another - 'we wish the people of Ethiopia would stop coming to us for food' (the Red Cross and other British agencies want to take food to their villages

instead) - may raise questions rather than money from many of those who gave to the 1984 relief effort. Why should famine re-emerge so soon after the unprecedented aid interventions for Ethiopia's famine victims in 1984/85?

The immediate 'trigger' for disaster in 1988 was undoubtedly the erratic and inadequate 1987 summer rains which, in combination with locust and armyworm infestations, ruined most sprouting crops in the northern-most provinces where long-running civil wars hamper relief. But why should Ethiopia's agrarian economy be so vulnerable to climatic change that the failure of one season's monsoon can threaten the lives of literally millions of people?

Apologists for the Ethiopian

government point to the fact that while Ethiopia has attracted very considerable amounts of *emergency* aid, for geo-political reasons it receives amongst the least *development* aid of any country on a per capita basis. Development assistance on a large scale, they rightly argue, is absolutely crucial if an extremely poor society like Ethiopia is to break the cycle of famine.

But the Right - whether in the form of Conservative MPs Julian Amery and John Biggs Davidson of the so-called Horn of Africa Council, or the editorial writers of the Murdoch press - are now arguing increasingly vehemently an alternative thesis about where responsibility really lies, namely with the Ethiopian government or, as the *Sunday Times* puts it, the

'gang of bloodstained, ideologically-obsessed zealots who should be accused before the court of world opinion of a charge of criminal negligence bordering on genocide.'

This 'Ethiopian-government-creates-famine' thesis emanates from the United States where there has been a serious bid in Congress for sanctions against Ethiopia. According to this argument, aid of any kind simply gives credibility to the very elements that perpetrate the famine. A sinister new line is now surfacing in Britain. 'There comes a point,' warns a right-wing Ethiopian specialist, 'When Ethiopia has to face up to the shortcomings of its agricultural policies.'

This sentiment can be translated into cruder language which - for the sake of a possible change in regime - would allow Ethiopia to stew in its own juice. So the old right-wing distinction between emergency humanitarian aid (previously 'beyond praise') and development assistance (which is to be withheld unless there is economic liberalisation) is crumbling. In recent weeks even emergency relief has been derided publicly as 'pathetic' and the overseas development agencies' humanitarian allocations described as money 'down the drain'.

In this intemperate climate it is difficult to establish the complicated causation of famine in Ethiopia with any degree of objectivity. But as a matter of historical fact Ethiopia has been prone to cycles of drought and famine for centuries, irrespective of the ideological complexion of her rulers. Famines occurred in 1965/6 and 1972/3 under the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie, yet the British and American governments found them no impediment to the provision of both development and emergency support.

It is therefore understandable that the Ethiopian authorities should dismiss criticism of their policies in terms of 'reactionary forces sowing adverse propaganda in order to discredit the re-

volutionary government'. But in the face of an accelerating environmental decline, reforms of one sort or another are badly needed in the rural sector - in the pricing of farm produce, reducing restrictions on the free movement of food and lowering the burden on peasant farmers.

Perhaps the most crucial reform relates to land tenure where the revolutionary government abolished the old semi-feudal land ownership and share-cropping system. Its replacement by shifting allocations of plots of land under the peasant associations has given farmers little or no incentive to improve yield per plot. As a result, agricultural production has stagnated since the revolution and except in years of very favourable rainfall, has not been able to keep pace with a growing population.

There is no 'instant fix' for Ethiopia's deep-seated problems. Its dire poverty and vulnerability to famine will be around to haunt the world's conscience for years to come. The tragic irony is that Ethiopia's agricultural potential is largely undeveloped with less than half of the arable land under cultivation and only a fraction under irrigation. To develop this potential there has to be a resolution of the conflicts in Eritrea and Tigray which rule out substantial investment in the land. Western aid donors will have to reach agreement with the Ethiopian government to put resources into development programmes genuinely centred on small farmers' needs.

Were then the contributions to Band Aid, Live Aid and the other 1984/5 appeals wasted? On the contrary, they helped save many lives and set in place an important disaster-preparedness system now being put into action. Most importantly, their priority funding of grassroots development projects aimed at increasing farmers' ability to produce food shows what the major governmental aid bodies could and should be doing on a much larger scale. •

Paddy Coulter