

FAMINE AND 'MAN-MADE' PROBLEMS

In a report on food prospects in 1991, CRDA, a consortium of about 50 NGOs working in Ethiopia disclosed on 22 November 1990 that due to failure of the current year's MEHER (main season) and prevailing 'man-made problems' in the northern regions of the country, the number of people likely to need food assistance in 1991 could amount to a total of 4.3 million. In December 1990, FAO also reported a near total crop failure in Eritria and parts of Tigray and appealed for 1 million tonnes of emergency food aid to Ethiopia.

Since the last great famine of 1984/85, such annual appeals for aid have become the norm for Ethiopia, while at the same time the country's democratic opposition forces have been trying all along to draw attention of the world community to the root causes of the tragedy which must be tackled if there is to be an end to famine and disaster in Ethiopia.

It is now clear to everyone that civil war, inept economic policies and drought have long been responsible for the famine problem. Even the government acknowledges that in addition to drought and other natural causes, 'man-made problems' have their share of responsibility in the country's food problems. Following the patterns used over the years, the November report offers a breakdown of the number of expected victims by drawing an apparently clear distinction between the number of people affected by natural causes and others that may starve and die due to 'man-made problems'. According to the report expected figure for victims of natural causes is about 3,500,000 while that of victims of 'man-made problems' is estimated to be about 860,000 or one-fifth of the total.

This figure is misleading. There is, in fact, a lack of common understanding as to what exactly these 'man-made problems' are and therefore of the extent of the damage they are causing. In any case, these figures are unacceptable to all those who believe that the main cause of the plight of our people is political and therefore 'man-made'.

Man-made problems cannot be limited, as the government has long pretended to armed conflicts in the northern parts of the country. Their effect is not limited to peasants in areas actually affected by armed conflicts. Admittedly, in Eritrea, Tigray, parts of Wollo and Gondar agricultural production has been sharply reduced by the insecurity inherent to any combat zone. But it should also be clear that agricultural production in non combat zones has also suffered from the wars in the northern regions.

Forced conscription of able-bodied peasants continues to uproot hundreds of thousands of people from their farms thus reducing the peasant labour force in areas unaffected by the armed conflicts. As early as 1980 it was estimated that the rural manpower withdrawn from production (refugees fleeing war and repression, those forcibly recruited in the militia, displaced persons, etc.) accounted for about 16% of the total productive manpower in agriculture. (see

NEW ETHIOPIA, June 1980).

In short, armed conflicts in the northern part of the country (and now in western Ethiopia) have their devastating effects on agricultural production, distribution, investment in other sectors of the economy, etc. over the entire country. We therefore believe that it would be wrong to assert that victims of 'man-made problems' are to be found only in areas affected by the wars and to limit their number to that of the peasant families living in these areas alone.

The repression and inept economic policies of the regime's making, which account for a considerable part in the country's sorry state, cannot be dismissed as natural calamities. The term 'man-made problems' in fact overlooks the considerable role played by the regime's repressive nature and its rigid economic policies. Arrests and repression against the country's intellectuals, workers and other sectors of the population, nepotism, corruption etc. have largely contributed to the collapse of the Ethiopian economy and have stifled all spirit of initiative and the will to assume responsibility. Thousands of intellectuals (economists, doctors, agronomists and other professionals) have either fled the country or refused to return for fear of repression.

The disastrous attempts at forced collectivization and rigid state control of agricultural marketing and pricing (officially abandoned with the reforms announced in March 1990) which have had considerable adverse effects on agriculture, are also 'man-made problems'. Although the political implications and consequences of relaxing of pricing policies on the regime's tight hold on the economy and the consequences for low income groups in urban centers are yet to be seen, it is now clear that even these half-hearted reforms have had positive effects on agricultural production.

The FAO report mentioned above notes that in the richest agricultural areas of the country which are not affected by armed conflicts, agricultural production has shown a substantial increase due to the partial lifting of some man-made problems. According to the report, as a result of policy reforms in 1990, 'when rigid socialist pricing policies were relaxed, and rainy season was average, the four regions accounting for 2/3 of national output registered an increase over the last year'. The same report concludes that these regions expect 'record and above average production' 5% greater than last year's harvest and 7% above the average for 1986-90.

Although it is difficult to speak of 'regions unaffected by war' in a country which has been living for years and continues to live under the constraints inherent to a war economy, it is clear that even relative peace and half-hearted economic reforms coupled with Ethiopia's considerable agricultural potential can result in substantial increases in production.

As is the case with many countries in sub-Sahara
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Gulf States, nor compromise Ethiopia's good ties with Egypt.

A number of delegations and notably one from the Kuwait government in exile visited Ethiopia to thank Mengistu for his firm stand against Iraq. On 22 November, a Saudi envoy told Mengistu that his country "whole-heartedly admired the strong stand taken by Ethiopia in condemning the illegal Iraqi invasion and that ever stronger relations and friendship developing at present between Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia would enable them to achieve great results and benefits in spheres of mutual concern". One immediate benefit to Mengistu was a promise of 400 million US dollars of Saudi financial aid.

Although this was not spelled out clearly, one field of cooperation in the "spheres of mutual concern" was in connection with the declared objective of the Saudis to give political, military and financial support to the Sudan People's Liberation Army engaged in a long-drawn-out war against Khartoum, and which for its part has offered to dispatch a contingent of 500 men "to defend Saudi Arabia and participate in the liberation of Kuwait". It is widely believed that the Saudi military and material assistance to rebels in southern Sudan will transit through Ethiopia where the movement has long enjoyed all-round support.

All this has led some observers - including many Ethiopians - to conclude that the Gulf crisis has been a windfall for Mengistu.

The same cannot be said of the Al Bashir military junta in Khartoum which finds itself practically surrounded by countries which have opted for the anti-Iraqi coalition. With hostile Egypt to the north, Ethiopia to the east and Saudi Arabia across the Red Sea, the consequences to the fundamentalist junta's hold to power were so obvious that one Sudanese opposition spokesman termed Al Bashir's pro Iraqi stand as "an incredible blunder".

Except Iraq and distant Iran, which has expressed full support of Khartoum's Islamic orientation and has called for a resolute struggle against the Christian dominated SPLA which Teheran terms as "a danger to Islam and the Muslims" the Al Bashir junta seems to enjoy no substantial outside support in its struggle against rising opposition.

Old foes like former president Jaffar Al Nimery, ousted from power in 1985 are now openly preparing to give what they believe will be a "coup de grâce" to a beleaguered and isolated regime which is also facing tremendous economic problems aggravated by the interruption of Western aid. The former president toured Gulf states in October and November declaring, as he did to the UAE daily AL ITTAHID that "He came to seek support to topple the military junta which has become a tool of Iraq" and that in this connection, he would visit Ethiopia and Kenya soon.

A more serious threat came in late September when the former Chief of Staff of the Sudanese army, Lt. general Fathi Ahmed Ali went underground with two other retired high ranking officers. A few days later, he

surfaced in Cairo and declared that although he had been ousted following the "illegal coup d'Etat in June 1989" he still considered himself the head of the army and the only legitimate representative of the Sudanese armed forces. On 29 September a clandestine radio calling itself "Voice of the force of National Democratic Alliance" read out a statement by the "legitimate leadership of the armed forces" which condemned the junta's policy in the Gulf and forcefully rejected the idea of Sudan's "Being a dagger aimed at the chest of fraternal Egypt, of being a tool used to threaten the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and a threat to the unity of our neighbor Ethiopia".

All these indicate that the Al Bashir regime, which faces unprecedented and growing hostility from its immediate neighbors and coordinated opposition from within the country, is in great danger and may not survive the turmoil.

The dangers for the struggle for democracy in Ethiopia are no less clear. Mengistu had always tried to suppress all and any opposition to his dictatorial rule, although military setbacks and increased international isolation during the past years, have led him to make some half-hearted efforts at reforms and unconvincing attempts at negotiations to peacefully resolve the armed conflicts ravaging the country. Many fear that this political and military 'windfall' may lead the dictator to make incorrect and dangerous conclusions. Feeling stronger than before, he may resort to his favourite scorched earth tactics to silence democratic opposition and pursue his never abandoned dream of a military solution to the various armed conflicts in the country.

Although the costs of this dangerous illusion may be high in terms of increased war damage, continued repression and denial of our people's fundamental rights, sooner or later it will become clear that there will never be peace and stability in Ethiopia until and unless the questions of democracy and self-determination are seriously and positively addressed.

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Africa, drought will remain a problem for many years to come. But food shortages resulting from poor rains or other natural factors turn into devastating famines only in countries like Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan and Liberia where man-made problems generate serious crises of which famine is but the most tragic manifestation.

That is why it would be difficult for us to accept the figures which limit the number of expected famine victims of man made problems to only one-fifth of the total. We argue that man-made problems are not only the armed conflicts but a whole series of economic, political and policy problems which must be addressed if a solution is to be found to our country's problems. Without recognizing the overwhelming role played by political and other policy matters which are of the regime's making, it would be hard to combat the immediate effects of famine by providing the necessary assistance to victims, let alone to do away with famine in the long run.