

TOWARDS THE WORLD'S FIRST SUPERFAMINE ?

"For years, Ethiopia has been heading for an economic disaster which could make it, in the words of a U.N. expert, the most likely site for the world's first super famine". These words were written by a journalist of the Guardian in early 1978.

The spectre of this "world's first super famine" is fast becoming a reality in this ravaged and ruined land. As a result of three years of military dictatorship and soviet domination, the country is drifting into indescrivable chaos. The world knows about the horrors of the Wollo disaster of 1973. But what we are witnessing today is much more serious both by the number of people and regions affected and by the frightening perspectives that lay ahead.

IN 1973 about 1.7 million people in 4 regions were affected by famine and out of these 200,000 peasants perished in the disaster. During the last 3 years, notwithsatanding the triumphant propaganda campaign on the "achievements" of the military dictatorship, famine has constantly been on the rise. Figures given by the RRC show that the number of "drought affected" people was about 2 million for 1978, 3 million in 1979 and by April 1980 has reached the staggering figure of 5.089.000 in 9 administrative regions of the country. Under the dictatorship's "socialism" and soviet "internationalism" Ethiopia is thus at grips with the most serious famine in its history. Neither has this figure a parallel in any country in the World. A UNICEF statement made at the end of May 1980 puts the number of people threatened by famine in Africa at 20 million. According to UNICEF more than 5 millions of these are Ethiopians. One out of every four starving African is an Ethiopian. When one considers the fact that well over a million people have already left their home land in order to escape famine and repression in the prison-state of Ethiopia, and that according to figures of the UNHCR one out of every ten refugees in the World is an Ethiopian, one can have a fair idea of the wretched state to which Ethiopia has been reduced under the military dictatorship.

But this is not the whole picture. As long as the military dictatorship holds on to Addis Abeba, there is no end at sight to the repression and scorched earth policies and the famine and misery that they generate.

Just as in 1973, the present disaster can be partially attributed to natural calamities. But political and military factors are infinitely more important now than during the Wollo disaster. This has been clearly underscored by a confidential report submitted to the Ethiopian government by Dr. Lars Bon-

destam, a swedish expert, in October 1977. In this report intitled "Expected famine in Ethiopia" the expert warned that a famine disaster as serious as the one in 1973 was threatening Ethiopia. After noting that the famine is generated more by political and military factors than by natural causes, the report strongly suggested that appropriate political measures be taken in order to curb the consequences of the impending catastroph.

While the report demanded that war be "offocially declared on famine and misery" what the country witnessed was a declaration of war on the Ethiopian people in general and the oppressed nationalities in particular. The "Red terror" campaign of early 1978, the unprecident repression against Ethiopias progressives that followed, and the chauvinist war unleashed against the oppressed nationalities have all contributed to create and aggravate the present disaster. They have completly disorga- nized the country's economy, brought about a fall in agricul- tural and industrial production, disrupted the transportation and distribution circuits etc.

The military regime not only pursues these famine gene- rating policies but also agravates the situation by other irresponsible and criminal actions which remind us of the attitudes of the Haile Selassie regime during the 1973 disaster. Just as the Haile Selassie days, the present regime tried to hide the existence of a serious famine. It was only after thousands of peasants fled to the neighbouring countries with their grim tales of famine and misery that the regime was forced to acknowledge that there was famine in Ethiopia. Just as the Haile Selassie days the regime continues to speak of "some loss in life"? We know that in the vocabulary of the feudo-fascist Haile Selassie this "some loss in life" meant the death of 200.000 poor peasants. This time nobody except perhaps the military regime itself knows how many ^{have} already died in the disaster. Nobody knows how many more will perish before the World discovers the full horror of the situation.

What is more revolting is the fact that what little and belated international assisstance is given to the Ethiopian people is being diverted by the military dictatorship in order to per- petuate these same famine generating policies. This embezzlement of relief funds by the ~~military~~ regime has been so notorious that the Ethiopian minister for social affairs, Mr. Kassa Kebede was forced to recognizeit. Asked about these ~~practices~~ ^{practices} in a meeting with representatives of some relief organizations in Stockholm in May 1980, all that he could say was that "the country had other priorities during the last years"! This em- bezzlement of relief funds is, so flagrant that the UN disaster relief office was forced to pass a resolution in November 1979, ^{requesting} asking relief organizations "to see to it that the assistance is strictly used for relief purposes only".

This however does not mean that relief assistance to the famine victims should be interrupted. What is unfolding in Ethiopia is the most devastating case of famine in the world. However ravaging the Wollo famine of 1973 might have been, the present situation might result in yet untold tragedy for the country. Unfortunately for the Ethiopian people the horrors of the 1973 crisis were discovered by the international community after it was too late i.e. after 200,000 peasants perished in the disaster. We fear that, unless immediate relief reaches the famine victims NOW, it may again be too late to save lives and avert the impending catastrophe. The Ethiopian people need assistance. What we suggested is in line with the UN disaster relief office statement. Donors must see to it that the relief materials get to those who need them. This can be done by channelling all relief through the humanitarian relief organizations that are already operating on the field.

In line with the instructions of the leadership in Addis Abeba, ME'ISONE's foreign section has contacted some of these organizations. They have expressed their willingness to cooperate with the organization and to distribute relief material collected by ME'ISONE's relief committee through their own channels in Ethiopia.

To this effect ME'ISONE has issued a memorandum on the famine situation in Ethiopia in July 1980 and is launching a campaign to raise relief funds and to collect material (cloths, tents, medicine, etc) to help the victims of the disaster. It has appealed to all friends of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people to realise the gravity of the disaster, to demand an end to the famine generating policies of the military dictatorship and to participate in the life saving efforts by extending their helpful hands to the victims of famine and repression in Ethiopia.

THE FACE OF THE DISASTER IN ETHIOPIA



Foto: Lars Åström

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SAVE LIVES ?

- * Send telegrammes and/or letters of protest expressing your opposition to the famine generating policies of the government and the embezzlement of relief funds in order to perpetuate these policies ; write to :

PMAC
P.O.Box 5707
Addis Abeba, ETHIOPIA

- * Participate in our life saving campaign by sending your donations to :

P. JAVAUX
Crédit Lyonnais
Compte N° 42682 Z
GY 600 (FRANCE)

- * Other relief material (cloths, tents, medecine...) can be given to our relief committees in your respective countries who will forward them to relief organizations operating in Ethiopia.