

MEMORANDUM

REPRESSION, WAR AND FAMINE
IN ETHIOPIA

BY

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I. HOW SERIOUS IS THE DISASTER ?

Ethiopia is being ravaged by another famine. In the background of the demagogic and triumphant display of the "achievements" of the military regime, millions of Ethiopians are at grips with one of the most deadly famines in the country's history.

Today, the whole world knows how serious and devastating the Wallo famine was in 1973. Unfortunately for the Ethiopian people, the world and the rest of the country learnt about that horrible situation after it was too late. The result was a staggering toll, claiming the lives of 200,000 peasants. But, however tragic that situation was, a combination of natural, economic, political and military factors now makes the situation in this ruined and ravaged land more disastrous than in 1973.

1. Three times more victims now than in 1973

During the 1973 disaster, a total of 1,700,000 people were threatened by famine. Out of those, 200,000 died. The famine stricken areas were limited to the regions of Wollo, Tigraye, Hararge and northern Shoa. Today, according to figures given by the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the famine stricken population is well over 5 million and 9 out of 14 administrative regions of the country are exposed to the disaster.¹ This figure makes the Ethiopian famine the worst in contemporary history. A UNICEF statement made on 24 May 1980 has established that out of 20,000,000 people threatened by famine in Africa, well over 5 million are Ethiopians.

Even when the allowances are made for the regime's evident efforts to minimize the problem, these figures (which do not include the 2 million refugees who have fled the country to escape famine and repression) show that the number of victims has increased three-fold since 1973.

The 1973 famine was accompanied by an inevitable variety of epidemics. Outbreaks of cholera, small pox, typhus dysentery and tuberculosis which were rather common under normal circumstances, reached epidemic proportions. They claimed the lives of whole commu-

nitities and destroyed most of the cattle in the affected regions. The RRC statement does not say anything about human suffering and the number of people that died as a result of the present famine. It only says that "a number of people and cattle have already died" and warns that the Ethiopian people can be exposed to "yet untold misery" if no immediate help is obtained to "avert impending catastrophe". One does not have to read between the lines to understand that for the Ethiopian people the situation is very dark indeed!

2. Famine is constantly on the rise

A glance at the figures given by different sources during the last 4 years also shows that the number of people and regions threatened by famine is constantly on the rise.

| Year | no. of people affected by famine | regions affected by famine |
|------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1977 | 1,040,000 | 4 regions : Gondar, Shoa Tigray, Wollo |
| 1978 | 2,280,000 | 6 regions : Eritrea, Har- arge, Sidamo, Shoa, Ti- graye, Wollo |
| 1979 | 3,000,000 | 7 regions : Bale, Eritrea Hararge, Shoa, Sidamo Tigray, Wollo |
| 1980 | 5,089,000 | 9 regions : Bale, Gamogofa Gondar, Eritrea, Hararge Sidamo, Shoa, Trigraye, Wollo |

These figures speak for themselves. What the table does not show however, is that in all of the above regions, except Shoa and parts of Wollo, there are armed conflicts caused mainly by the regime's repressive policies against the oppressed nationalities.

3. Political causes are more important now than in 1973

The 1973 famine was a result of natural calamities and the socio-economic set-up imposed on the Ethiopian people by the decadent feudal order. It was aggravated by the corruption and greed of the ruling classes and their irresponsible attitudes towards the suffering of their compatriots. These same age-old elements have certainly contributed to create the present situation, but political and military factors are infinitely more important now than in 1973. The benefits of the partial elimination of the feudal land-holding system have been more than offset by adverse political developments and their socio-economic consequences. It must be said at the outset that the socio-economic transformations that took place during the years 1974-77 can in no way be held responsible for the present situation. Rather it is the counter-revolutionary developments, the scorched earth policies of the military dictatorship and the Soviet block countries, the unprecedented repression against the Ethiopian people, that have completely ruined the Ethiopian economy and disorganized the distribution circuits.

As early as 1973 a confidential report entitled "Expected famine in Ethiopia" was submitted to the Ethiopian government by Dr. Lars BONDESTAM³. The Swedish economist, who worked at that time for the "Disaster preparedness Planning Programme" of the RRC, warned the Ethiopian authorities that there was "an inevitable risk of famine in Ethiopia" and that "as the conflicts which contribute to the deteriorating economic and food situation are of a political nature, it obviously follows that solutions to alleviate these problems are also basically political" (p. 23). But the regime has never tried to solve these famine generating conflicts by peaceful means. The "solution" opted for is rather an intensification of war and repression, as if the regime is out to "solve" the problems by destroying the country and wiping out its people. Today, war is raging in more than half of the Ethiopian administrative regions and these are precisely the areas where famine hits hardest. The revolting fact is, that the meager and belated assistance intended for the victims is embezzled by the regime to perpetuate these same scorched earth policies that have so direly contributed to creating the disaster. What is even more serious to the Ethiopian

people is that as long as the military dictatorship holds on to Addis Abeba, there is no end in sight to these adverse political developments and the famine they generate.

4. The perspectives are frightening

We have seen how famine has increased in Ethiopia during the last four years. Behind the rising figures, there lie the incalculable consequences of the disaster in terms of human suffering and social dislocation. No one yet knows the number of people who have already died as a result of the famine. No one knows how many will die before the world discovers the horrors of this tragedy and mobilizes efforts to curb its effects. But one thing is already sure. As the famine generating factors are mainly of the regime's making, the situation is bound to deteriorate still further. As one UN expert observer has put it : "Ethiopia has for decades been heading for a disaster that would make it one of the most likely sites for the world's first superfamine".⁴

As things stand at present, the effects of the regime's irresponsible policies go far beyond the present tragedy. As the same observer rightly noted : "The problem is that the race to rescue much of Ethiopia's farmlands and nearly all of its semi-arid grazing land is one that has to be won within the next few years. There is a deadline looming up -- five or ten years from now -- after which ecological decline will be irreversible or reversible only by methods too costly for a poor country.

In order to be sure of winning the race, Ethiopia needs an end to war and insurrection, and the establishment of settled relations between government and peasantry. The race could still be won even in the absence of such ideal conditions, but the odds are becoming dangerously shorter".⁵

II. WHY THE DISASTER ?

The stage for the present crisis was set by the fall in the country's agricultural and industrial production and the breakdown of the distribution mechanisms.

1. The fall in agricultural production

The first two years after the February movement were years of good harvest. Compared to 1974/75 when grain production was 4.8 million tons, production for 1975/76 and 1976/77 stood at 5.4 and 5.2 million tons respectively. But with external aggression and internal counter-revolution in 1977/78, production started to drop below the 1974/75 level. That year agricultural production was only 4.7 million tons.⁶

The effect of the fall in agricultural production should also be weighed against the population increase of about 2.5% per year. This means less food for more people. Even more relevant to the famine is the breakdown of the food distribution system because of economic, political and military factors.

2. The breakdown of distribution mechanisms

Both economic and political factors have contributed to disrupting the mechanisms which formerly governed the transfer of food supplies from the surplus producing rural areas to urban centers and areas which are not self-sufficient. The following two factors are the most important of these -- surpluses cannot flow to regions that need them until a solution has been found.

a) The "Scissors" crisis

As was the case in the early years of the Russian revolution, the "scissors" crisis is having its adverse effects on the distribution of food in the country. In fact, one important result of the partial implementation of the land reform bill, and the rightful compensation for the peasants' hard labor, is an increase in food consumption which has risen by an estimated 5-10% (100-200 calories per day) in the rural areas. ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia")

"The combination of a decrease in total production and an increase in subsistence consumption results in a much smaller surplus for the market. Assuming constant labor productivity, the marketed grain per capita (for non peasants) decreases by 25-30%. ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia")

But even when there is a surplus to be marketed the peasants are reluctant to sell. During the pre-revolution years, comparatively low food prices were made possible by the heavy exploitation of the peasantry. In exchange for this cheap food, the towns produced almost nothing for the peasants who lived at bare subsistence level. Now the peasants, who are in an economic position which permits them to control land and produce, demand manufactured goods in exchange for their surplus to be marketed.

But as things stand at present, the towns cannot provide these manufactured goods and services in exchange for food in the rural areas. This is not possible for the simple reason that in the cities too, the general breakdown of the economy due to repression and war has resulted in a fall in industrial production.

The lack of consumer goods to provide incentives to farmers to seek higher cash income has resulted in the withholding of grain by surplus producing peasants. The negative side effects for non-peasants and specially for the urban poor are obvious. As Dr. Lars Bondestam warned in his report : "The new imbalance between urban and rural areas implies a transfer of hunger and maybe famine, from the countryside to the towns .. Unless consumer goods (specifically salt, sugar, oil, cloths and agricultural implements, all preferably locally made) are offered to the peasants, this state will continue and will in fact mean a loss of both health and money" ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia"). As for the main victims of this situation the report singles out the urban poor. "The upper and higher brackets of the middle classes manage to satisfy their demands by hoarding grain, which together with the inevitable emergence of a widespread black market further aggravates the supply of food for the urban poor -- now more alienated from the basic necessities than ever before" ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia").

Obvious political considerations have however spared the towns the horrors of the famine that is ravaging the countryside. Even if severe shortage of grain and mounting prices are rampant in the cities, "The partial transfer of hunger from the periphery towards the population centers of the country has implied an increasing awareness of the problems and an increasing motivation to tackle them, conditioned by humanitarian motives as well as by the fear of hunger riots and consequent political turmoil, which are more likely in the urban than in the rural areas" ("Expected famine in Ethiopia").

But even when the surplus is available, another key factor is that the distribution process, i.e. transportation, has been so disrupted that food supplies do not reach the areas where they are needed most.

b) Transportation

In a country like Ethiopia, where about half the population lives 30 or more kilometers away from any road, this bottleneck to social and economic development becomes disastrous when urgent relief is needed to save lives in remote areas. The 1973 catastrophe was a very cruel experience in this sense. Even when relief material was available, communication difficulties prevented its being distributed. After 1974, some efforts were made by the RRC, the World Food Programme (WFP), the Ethiopian road Authority and by the people themselves to increase the road network and the capacity of the truck fleet in the country.

According to WFP, there were some 3,500 heavy trucks in the country with an estimated capacity of 73,000 tons in 1974. Assuming that 10% have to be renewed every year, over more than 1,000 new trucks should have been bought during the last three years to maintain capacity. But only 570 new trucks were imported in this time -- capacity has dropped by some 15%. At the end of 1977, the National Transport Company (NATRACO), the WFP and the Agricultural Marketing Corporation

imported 700 trucks. This was not enough to meet the urgent need which the WFP estimated at 1,500 trucks. During the years 1978 and 1979, international assistance brought in 168 trucks and 124 trailers and the Ethiopian government bought as many. By the end of 1979, the UN Disaster Relief Coordination Office (UNDRCO) estimated that "The existing capacity of the truck fleet was sufficient for the transportation of grain, fertilizers etc. from the ports to the principal storehouses in the country."⁷

Even if this assessment is accurate, this solution of a technical problem did not mean an end to the crisis. Other economic, political and military factors make even greater demands upon the organization of transportation of food, thus reducing the relief distribution capacity of the existing fleet.

The "scissors" crisis that we have already noted and the increasing demands of the peasants for consumer goods as a counterpart for their food surplus naturally implies a greater demand for transportation. Moreover, as supplies have to be organized for the more than 2 million people (displaced persons in temporary shelters in the country, peasants in the "people's militia", etc.) who are separated geographically from their land, the already strained transport facilities are burdened with a supplementary task.

Political and military factors have reduced the "relief capacity" of the existing truck fleet and prevented its efficient utilization.

In 1977, the Somali invasion forced the country to divert a full 25% of the total civilian truck fleet for use by the military. We have no reason whatsoever to believe that the Ministry of Communications regulations for priority use of civilian trucks have been altered. Active guerilla war is still going on in the Ogaden, the struggle of the Eritrean people

continues and revolts have now spread to more than half the administrative regions of the country. The regime, which persists in seeking "military solutions" to all these political problems, has not been able to take the country out of the "war economy" situation of 1977/78.

The different conflicts have also resulted in the breakdown of the transport network, as the existing roads are damaged, bridges destroyed, etc. Even when roads are available the problem is to move through what are effectively war zones. Road transportation has to be escorted by military convoys thus causing delay and underutilization of the existing truck fleet. If we add to this the fact that the Djibouti-Addis Abeba railway is regularly sabotaged and cannot be considered a reliable means of transportation, we see how very serious the problem is.

Given these transportation difficulties, storage facilities, which are crucial in the struggle against famine could have played an important role in combating the disaster. While a number of African countries are establishing cereal reserves as a question of policy in order to offset poor harvests, Ethiopia under Haile Selassie or under the present regime has always stood as an exception. During the Wollo famine, lack of storage facilities resulted in the grain's rotting when it was not destroyed by bad weather, consumed by insects, rats or birds. Drawing the appropriate lessons from the 1973 disaster, the FAO and other concerned organizations called upon the Ethiopian government to pay attention to this aspect of the problem and to provide the country with a fairly distributed network of store houses. According to Lars Bondestam the estimated total government storage capacity was 280,000 tons in 1977. Not only is this insufficient but the network suffers from seriously biased distribution. Addis Abeba and Asmara have about half of the storage capacity, whereas the regions of Bale, Sidamo and Gamogofa which are among the most struck by the present famine have less than 7% ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia").

To sum up, we can say that a combination of various natural and man-made factors have led to a drop in agricultural production; distribution of what little surplus is available and international assistance is hampered by political and military factors. In the absence of any coherent policy to combat famine and its fundamental causes, the last three years have witnessed an alarming increase in the number of people affected. The famine generating factors are more political than natural. Trying to elude the political problem, as the regime is now doing, will not help relief efforts, let alone provide durable solutions for famine in Ethiopia.

III. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE ?

Faced with a diversity of causes, many well-meaning people find it very difficult to pinpoint the main factor that has generated the present crisis. Comparing the present situation with the socio-economic order that was held responsible for the 1973 disaster, some even tend to think that with the feudal land-holding system now partially abolished, only natural calamities can be held responsible for the present problems. But this is far from reality.

It is true that natural factors have done their share in creating this disaster. In the northern part of the country, specially in Shoa, Wollo and Tigraye, the last two years suffered from deficient and unreliable rainfall. In the southern and eastern regions also, prolonged drought has affected agricultural production and the pastoral population. It is also true that, deforestation and overgrazing and certain forms of cultivation that are rampant in the heavily populated northern high lands make these regions particularly vulnerable, and one or two bad rainy seasons plus drought can be enough to provoke disastrous famines. A telling example of the effect of natural calamities on agricultural production is the Wollo harvest in 1977/78. According to figures given by the "Natural Disaster Aid Coordinating Central Committee" in early 1979, "In 1977/78, crop production comprising barley, wheat and Teff

were totally destroyed in the four provinces of Wag, Lasta, Wadela Delanta, and Worahimanou of Wollo by pests, frost, rust and heavy or inadequate rainfall. During that year 75% of the production of the major crops was destroyed in most of the Wollo provinces. At the same time, the consumption of barley affected with a fungus known as "Ergot" was poisoning humans and animals"⁸. As early as the beginning of the 1970's experts warned that if these problems were not tackled quickly and efficiently, a single poor rainy season would be enough to tip the balance between subsistence and famine in these chronically overpopulated, overgrazed, deforested and eroded regions. However, no effort worth mentioning was undertaken by Haile Selassie's government or the present regime to institute programmes for forestation, crop rotation, deeper and rational tilling, or development of drought resistant crops in these critical areas.

Irrespective of the gravity of the natural calamities, however, what we can say is : had it not been for the irresponsible attitudes of the present regime and its other "priorities", the consequences of these natural factors could have been minimized.

Famine has developed at an alarming rate during the last three years and is now taking disastrous proportions because the abolition of the feudal land-holding system has stopped halfway before the logical supplementary measures, that are an integral and indispensable part of coherent and democratic land reform, were developed.

Economic and political measures aimed at ensuring balanced economic growth both in the cities and rural areas and setting up a democratic order should have accompanied the land reform bill. This is precisely what the regime's counter-revolutionary policies failed to achieve. For example, so long as land reform is not accompanied by an increase in manufacturing and urban employment, the lack of consumer goods to provide an incentive

to farmers to seek higher cash incomes becomes a serious obstacle to agricultural production. As we have already noted, not only are farmers reluctant to produce more, but what little surplus is available is withheld and does not reach the cities. What the regime did to "solve" this economic problem is to resort to force to squeeze out this surplus from the peasants. In order to do this, it resorted to a series of anti-democratic actions aimed at ensuring the regime's tight control on the peasants' produce and its political hold on their democratic associations. In the process, the regime did not solve the problem, rather it touched off a series of peasant revolts as they were determined to stay masters of their production and to defend their associations which were fast becoming organs of local self-administration during the revolutionary years.

As all "peaceful" attempts were frustrated and as the regime failed to work out a functioning democratic relationship with the peasants, from an economic or a political standpoint, it stepped up its vicious anti-peasant propaganda campaign in early 1978. The government attacked "peasant individualism", "rightist peasants" (read peasants who supported MEISONE) "narrow nationalists" (read progressive militants of the oppressed nationalities), etc. Unprecedented repression against the peasants promptly followed. Thousands were summarily executed, arrested or dismissed from the posts of leadership to which they had been elected. Hundreds of thousands were also forced in to exile.

What is even more revolting is the fact that as early as October 1977, the regime was warned of the catastrophic consequences that would follow if the "military solutions" were pursued to "solve" all the political problems that are facing the country.

The confidential report that we have quoted earlier categorically warned that "There is an inevitable risk of famine

in Ethiopia possibly of the same magnitude as the one in 1973. By acknowledging this, the risk may be diminished and a disaster may be avoided". After warning that "Demogagy and pretended ignorance i.e. deliberate avoidance of sensitive facts, resulting in the withholding of information and in not taking the appropriate measures to prevent unnecessary suffering (as in 1973) is too high a price to 'save one's face' and can under no circumstances be defended". The report recommended that "a war be officially declared also against famine and misery and consequent measures be taken to relieve the current and potential victims" ("Expected Famine in Ethiopia").

The warning was clear. But the criminal military regime did just the opposite. Only one month later, the regime "officially declared war" not on 'famine and misery', but on the Ethiopian people. In November 1977, it officially declared a so-called red terror campaign during which the regime's henchmen were let loose on the people and indulged in wanton killings of thousands of innocent workers, intellectuals and youths. This was followed by mass arrest of 30,000 of the remaining progressives and patriots who were thrown into the regime's overcrowded prisons. All the feeble attempts which had been made to solve the Eritrean problem peacefully were completely abandoned. In July 1978, the regime rejected the historical call made by the two Eritrean fronts to "negociate without any preconditions". Instead it publicly announced that the only solution to the Eritrean problem was military and intensified its devastating policies there. As it betrayed the National Democratic Revolution Programme of April 1976, and embarked upon a policy of untold chauvinist repression, the oppressed nationalities rose in revolt and more than half the administrative regions of the country became the scene of armed conflicts. This repression also led over two million people to flee their homeland.

1. War and repression - reduced agricultural production

The effects of war and repression for which the present dictatorship is responsible, were devastating on agricultural production.

The link between the current famine and the various armed conflicts can be easily established by noting that it is precisely those regions where war and chauvinist repression is raging that are the hardest struck by this disaster and which have undergone an alarming increase of famine during the last three years.

TABLE 2. The increase in persons affected by famine
(by region 1978 - 1980)⁹

| Region | N° of persons affected by famine in 1978 | N° of persons affected by famine in 1980 |
|---------|---|---|
| Bale | -- | 515,000 |
| Eritrea | 600,000 | 1,002,000 |
| Hararge | 500,000 | 1,001,000 |
| Sidemo | 250,000 | 270,000 |
| Tigraye | 200,000 | 963,000 |
| Wollo | 1,200,000 | 950,000 |

It is worth noting that in the region of Wollo, which has been the most affected by natural calamities, the number of people threatened by starvation has "dropped" from 1,200,000 to 950,000, whereas in the regions where armed conflict is taking place, the number of victims has risen, sometimes as much as fourfold in as the case in Tigray.

Hararge was the region most affected by the Somali invasion in 1977/78. The destruction caused is well known. In addition to the thousands of people who were slaughtered, many peasants and nomads were made destitute. Development projects in eastern and southern Ethiopia, worth millions of dollars were destroyed. Schools, hospitals, bridges, farms, power plants, water supply systems and industrial plants were not spared. Whole villages were razed to the ground. If famine is raging in the regions of Hararge, Sidamo and Bale, it is partially due to wanton destruction by the Somali army and the socio-economic dislocation that followed.

But the defeat of the Somalis in early 1978 did not mean an end to the sufferings of the people in these areas. On the contrary, the above table shows that famine in all of these regions has increased at an alarming rate ever since. The reason is simple. In addition to the Somali-backed guerrilla war that is still actively going on in the Ogaden, the chauvinist and counter-revolutionary policies of the military regime have touched off a series of legitimate revolts in these and other regions. The regime's chauvinism has led to the intensification of the national liberation wars in Eritrea and Tigraye. Resorting to its favorite scorched earth policies the regime has unleashed the full force of its Soviet-backed repressive machinery against these legitimate national movements.

In addition, these wars and repression have contributed to the fall in agricultural production by reducing the productive peasant force. They have forced over two million people to flee their homeland and to seek exile in neighbouring countries. According to figures given by the RRC, another 1.8 million people have seen their homes burnt, their livelihood destroyed and are now living in temporary shelters.¹⁰

Beyond the problems in terms of social dislocation and human suffering, the adverse economic consequences are clear. Out of the nearly four million people that were forcibly uprooted from their land, well over half are able-bodied men

and women who participated fully in production. War and devastation have also taken a heavy toll of the productive peasant force as the regime has launched a policy of forced recruitment of about 250,000 peasants into its "people's militia". The combined effect of all these are alarming specially when we compare the situation with that which prevailed in 1977.

Lars Bondestam estimated in his report that as of October 1977, the rural manpower withdrawn from production (refugees, peasant militia) represented about half a million people, ie. 5% of the productive peasant force. The assumption was that out of a total of 25 million people in the rural areas, only 40% -- 10 million people -- directly participated in agricultural production. If we maintain the same assumptions we find that, out of the 4 million people that are geographically separated from their land, the number of people withdrawn from agricultural production is 1.6 million or 16% of the productive manpower in agriculture.

2. War and repression have reduced industrial production

A look at the geographical distribution of the industrial activities shows that a full 30% are in Eritrea. There has been a very sharp fall in industrial production during the last four years as 26 out of the 30 factories in Eritrea were affected by the war there. But, whatever they may produce, the industries in Eritrea cannot supply manufactured goods anymore and will not do so as long as the war continues. Another 10% of the country's industrial activities are in the Hararge region which was devastated by the Somali aggression and now by the regime's undeclared war on the oppressed nationalities of the region.

In Addis Abeba and the surrounding areas, repression against workers and intellectuals, merchants, etc. has also contributed to the general breakdown of the modern sector of the economy. We have seen how the "red terror" campaign has claimed a heavy toll of these forces. In some factories as many as 120 qualified workers were executed or arrested and

in most cases, such criminal acts led directly to a drop in production. The arrest of more than one thousand intellectuals (economists, doctors, agronomists, engineers, geologists, veterinarians, lawyers, etc.) and the terror under which those who have escaped arrest are forced to live, have contributed to the disorganization of the economy and stifled all spirit of initiative and the will to assume responsibility. In addition, thousands of intellectuals have fled the country or refused to return from abroad for fear of the anti-intellectual repression in the country.

The lack of spare parts, the absence of any new investment to replace old machines, the corruption, incompetence and sabotage of the bureaucracy, the breakdown of the transportation system, etc. have all contributed their share in reducing industrial production.

The economic crisis in the urban centers has provoked mass lay-offs, closing down some factories and incapacitating others. Recent examples are the dismissal of 400 employees from Ethiopian Airlines, the dismissal of 4,000 daily workers from 12 coffee exporting firms, the closure of a shoe factory in Addis Abeba, and the Wollega fana Transport Co. etc.

The breakdown of the modern sector of the economy and the subsequent fall in industrial production have provoked the "scissors crisis" that we have noted above and the transfer of famine to Ethiopia's cities.

3. Demagogy and irresponsibility

If the fundamental causes of the present disaster are war and repression, the demagogy and irresponsible attitudes of the regime only further aggravated the situation.

As we noted earlier, the regime knew about the impending catastrophe as early as October 1977. In spite of the recommendations of the report which said that "The magnitude of the problem demands international aid of humanitarian nature. But for such aid to be given in time requests have to be made now" -

(Expected Famine in Ethiopia), neither the Ethiopian people nor the International community were alerted of the grave situation. It is true that since 1977, the regime has revealed on several occasions that people in various regions were "affected by drought". But in spite of the alarmingly rising number of the "drought affected people", the regime never spoke of loss in human life and cattle. Haile Selassie's regime also admitted in mid-1973 that people were affected by drought and other natural calamities. It even revealed that the number affected was nearly 2 million people. But Haile Selassie only spoke of "some loss of human life", which in the end, meant the death of 200,000 poor peasants. The present regime's attitudes are no different. It could not hide the famine for the simple reason that over 2 million people have already fled the country with their grim stories of famine and repression in the prison state of Ethiopia. Unlike the case in 1973, the famine situation has spread to the urban centres, and, as was noted by Dr. Lars Bonestam, this has resulted in an "increasing awareness" of the population and made it nearly impossible to attempt to hide the state of affairs. The "embarrassing" situation forced the regime to admit that there was famine in Ethiopia and that it is increasing at an alarming rate. But here again, the regime only spoke of "some loss in human lives and cattle" without giving any figures as to the number of people that have died as a result of the present famine. Instead the regime's propaganda emphasized the endless series of "final solutions" being worked out to solve the problem rather than the alarming gravity of the famine itself. In an attempt to minimize the problem, the over 2 million downtrodden peasant refugees were dismissed by the chief of State himself as "a handful of exploiters who fled with money stolen from the Ethiopian people" (Statement on May 14, 1980). Empty talk about the far away but "bright" future is taken as a substitute to present solutions. The "green campaign" pompously launched in October 1978 was supposed to do away with hunger and poverty once and for all. At that time, it was announced that industrial production would grow by 45.6% (!) in one year (Ethiopian Herald, 15 Jan. 1979). At the same time, as if the RRC was not enough, the regime created the "Natural Disaster Aid Coordinating Central Committee".

X This supposedly started to "pour huge relief assistance" to the famine affected areas. Among the final solutions projected by this "Central Committee" we find the resettlement of 250,000 peasants from Wollo into the southern regions of Ethiopia. This solution is of course less an economically sound project than a political move intended to give the regime "reliable" outposts in the lands occupied by the "unreliable" oppressed nationalities in the southern part of the country.

That the regime is not taking the crisis very seriously and is trying to minimize the disaster can be shown by two recent examples. On April 24th, it announced that 5,089,000 people were threatened by famine and that "any delay in providing items for the relief of the affected populace would soon result in yet untold misery and destruction of humanity". But hardly a week later, the regime "forgot" all about the "impending catastrophe". In his may-day speech, the Chairman made no reference to the starving millions, let alone declaring war on famine and misery. Instead, the regime declared war on illiteracy and appealed to the Ethiopian people to mobilize en mass to accomplish the new "historical task" by participating in the "great literacy campaign"! Another example of such political window dressing : In June 1980, on the occasion of the first congress of its "Commission to Organize the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia", it ordered the residents of Addis Abeba to organize the most extravagant festival in the city's history. It has been estimated that these celebrations (including the free distribution of cakes and pepsi cola to each and every child in the city among other things) cost over \$2.5 million. A statement by MEISONE made on the occasion of those festivities noted that "such waste would have at best been dismissed as a macabre joke, had it not been for the fact that at the same time millions of Ethiopians were at grips with the most deadly famine in the country's history".

As may be expected and notwithstanding the periodic issue of impressive looking statistics and reports minutely detailing government relief efforts, the regime was not able to alleviate

the sufferings of the masses let alone do away with starvation in the country.

As for international assistance, the regime has its own reasons for disclosing the famine and even capitalizing on the seriousness of the situation. It needs this assistance not to alleviate the sufferings of the people but for its famine generating wars. It is now an open secret that the regime is diverting international assistance. This embezzlement has grown so flagrant that the UN disaster relief coordinating office was forced to pass a resolution demanding international relief organizations "to see to it that the assistance given is used for relief purposes only" (UN General Assembly, A-34-198, Sept. 11, 1979). Basing itself on documentary proof submitted to it by the EPLF and establishing that food provided by UNICEF was used for the army fighting in Eritrea, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (Milan, May 1980) condemned the Ethiopian government for such criminal actions.

MEISONE'S APPEAL TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. As we have tried to show in this memorandum, the present disaster in Ethiopia is generated more by war and repression than by natural calamities. We appeal to all friends of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people, and to the international community to demand an end to the famine generating policies of the military regime. We consider this as an indispensable step towards creating favourable conditions for efficient relief work and curbing the effects of the famine.

2. We appeal to the international community to demand that the regime provide full details of the disaster by disclosing the number of people that have perished up to now and to put an end to the embezzlement of relief funds.

3. We appeal to all humanitarian individuals and organizations to realise the gravity of the situation and to increase their assistance to the Ethiopian famine victims.

4. We appeal to relief donors to see to it that this assistance effectively gets to the people by channelling their aid through international relief organizations working in Ethiopia, rather than through the military dictatorship.

5. MEISONE is launching a campaign to raise funds and other relief material (clothes, tents, medicines, etc.) in order to help the starving. It has contacted some of the relief organizations operating in Ethiopia who have expressed willingness to distribute relief assistance obtained by MEISONE's relief committees through their own channels. We therefore appeal to all friends of Ethiopia to participate in our life-saving campaign by contribution to our relief fund and by giving other relief material to our relief committees established in their respective countries.

July 1980

References :

1. Ethiopian Herald April 20, 1980
- 2 The figures for 1977 are taken from a declaration of the RRC on Dec 26, 1976 on "food assistance needed for 1977"; those for 1978 from a statement of the "International league of Red Cross societies" made on Nov. 20, 1978. It is to be remembered that the "Provisional disaster relief coordinating committee had announced early in the year (Feb. 15, 1978) that 2 million people were affected by drought and "man made" problems. The figures for 1979 and 1980 are from statements by the RRC in May 1979 and April 24, 1980 respectively.
3. Dr. Lars Bondestam "Expected famine in Ethiopia" Disaster Preparedness Planning Programme, RRC, Addis Ababa, 19 October 1977
4. Martin Woollacott in the Guardian March 4, 1978
6. National Bank of Ethiopia, Quarterly Bulletin Vol.4 N°4 Dec. 1978
7. UN General Assembly A/34/198 Sept. 11, 1979
8. National Disaster Aid Coordinating Committee, June 1979
- 9 Figures for 1978 are taken from a statement by the ILRCS on Nov. 10, 1978 and those for 1980 from the RRC declaration
Ethiopian Herald April 24, 1980
- 10 Ethiopian Herald March 3, 1980