

## War and famine in Ethiopia 1982-5

**It is a commonplace that the great famine in Ethiopia during 1982-5 was caused as much by war as by natural adversity. It was the result of specific war strategies undertaken by the former government against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).**

The most obvious were the huge and devastating army counter offensives into the TPLF heartland, using up to 80,000 troops on each occasion. There were major offensives in 1980-1, 1983 and 1985. The 'seventh offensive' of February-May 1983 struck into the key grain-producing districts of western Tigray; it is from the launch of this attack that the onset of the famine can be dated, to the week.

However, the general counter-insurgency strategies implemented from 1980 onwards had an equally profound, though more insidious effect. The strategies were:

1. The bombing of marketplaces in rebel-held areas. Markets had to be held at night, which caused a dramatic down-turn in trading activity.
2. Restrictions on the private grain trade. The government harassed and detained grain traders using pack animals. This prevented the movement of surplus grain out of Raya (eastern Tigray), northern Gonder, and central Wollo in 1983-4.
3. Restrictions on migrant labour. Migrant labour was formerly a major source of income for poor people in northern Ethiopia. Government harassment virtually prevented this in the early 1980s. As these

strategies were introduced, widened and intensified, the famine began and then deepened. Large areas of southern and eastern Tigray are chronically in food deficit; the fighting and restrictions meant that the inhabitants were unable to follow their coping strategies to obtain money or food.

Measures one and two destroyed any spatial integration in the grain market: harvests literally rotted in surplus areas, while deficit areas had their problems greatly exaggerated. The price of grain in Mekele, capital of Tigray, shot up in November 1982, to 165 Ethiopian Birr per 100 kg sack – nearly twice what would have been expected if transport had been possible from nearby surplus-producing areas.

Measure three meant that while farmers in coffee producing areas of southern Ethiopia and grain surplus areas of Gonder and western Tigray suffered labour shortages, deficit areas on the eastern escarpment of the highlands had large unemployed populations. When the seventh offensive destroyed employment opportunities in Tigray in March 1983, the labourers who had managed to reach the area trekked back to relief shelters at Korem and Ibanat. They formed the destitute populations who were the basis of the first appeals by Oxfam and Save the Children Fund.

**Alex de Waal**, formerly at Africa Watch, 90 Borough High Street, London, SE1 1LL, Tel (071) 378 8008. Fax (071) 378 8029.

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## From war and famine to peace, food and livelihood

**The tide of war is ebbing in at least parts of SSA, but if emergency programmes are closed down in these areas, we may replicate - this time for human beings - the pattern of livestock losses from droughts. In Somalia, over half livestock losses occurred after drought had broken because five simple, well-known veterinary drugs were not available. Their supply was somehow viewed neither as 'emergency' nor as 'development' assistance.**

Only by recognising that calamity does not cease until livelihoods are restored can further loss of human life be averted. The means to achieve this are:

1. Reprogramming emergency operations to include livelihood rehabilitation.
2. Recognising the need for flexibility in the location of support operations. Dislocated persons and refugees are usually determined to go home as soon as possible. Their food and water needs cannot be deferred to fit a critical path project timetable or bureaucratic convenience.
3. Acting with utmost speed to articulate and implement operations.
4. Keeping costs per household served low by minimising 'high level' personnel requirements.

5. Identifying and accepting the priorities of returning and pauperised, in-place rural households which typically include: secure land use access; provision of food until harvest (9 to 15 months) - there are few 'instant crops' and even fewer household food reserves; distribution of clearing, building and tilling tools plus seeds and basic household kits (e.g. water pails, to save time); restoration of small to medium rural commercial networks; rapid, phased restoration of primary health, water and education access; and labour intensive, seasonal projects earning cash income for households until they have crops, livestock or fish to sell.

Unless this kind of approach is adopted there will be more deaths and more pauperisation, through institutional and imagination failure to provide a minimum enabling context.

**Reginald Herbold Green**, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RF. Tel (0273) 606261, Fax. (0273) 621202. *Publications: 'Conflict, Food and Famine: Reflections on Sub-Saharan Africa' (IDS/SCF Workshop Paper, March 1992); 'Reconstruction: The Road from Emergency to Development: Livelihood and Macroeconomics' (National Directorate of Planning, Discussion Paper, Maputo, Mozambique, June 1992).*

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later years of the conflict that both enabled soldiers and officials to create safe and functioning administrations, and provided the essential kick-start to the economy. Should agencies have been prepared to support the state and businesses directly?

The lesson from these experiences is that relief agencies cannot presume to a humanitarian detachment. They have to operate within the processes of the war situation. Whilst much can be done by protecting people from abuse, this cannot on its own be enough.

The various contributions to this issue of *Development Research Insights* elaborate and extend different facets of this analysis. Borton quantifies the rapid increase in the level of involvement of NGOs in relief operations. He focuses on UK aid but the situation is similar among other donors. It seems to reflect the (perhaps misguided) emphasis on speedy, accountable delivery of relief to civilian victims, rather than to addressing, as far as is possible, the prior problems which result in the emergence of extractive, militaristic structures. Hampson describes the legal framework applicable to relief operations. She suggests that there is greater scope for NGOs, even within existing mechanisms, to bring external pressure to bear on combatant forces, though it remains to be seen whether long term benefits will accrue in Africa from enforcing international law through military intervention. Yet relief agencies did make a very real contribution to the resolution of the Mozambique conflict, though indirectly. De Waal's description of the military strategy action of the Ethiopian government in 1982-1985 documents how the basis of livelihoods can be deliberately destroyed by the state. Relief agencies need to monitor and respond to such acts as the bombing of market places and the restriction of trade and population movements, by both state and rebel forces.

Meanwhile Green focusses our attention on post-war situations, suggesting strategies for more effective assistance to the reconstruction of livelihoods and basic services in the decimated war zones and for returning refugees. Buchanan-Smith, Davies and Petty and Maxwell describe recent thinking on famine early warning systems and on the developmental uses of food aid for famine prevention. While both these aid instruments have undergone considerable technical improvement and refinement in recent years, difficulties remain in their application in conflict situations. Their adaptation to conflict situations requires careful consideration of the political economy of war and its impact on livelihoods, and the nature of and opportunities for external intervention.

**Ken Wilson**,  
Refugee Studies Programme,  
Queen Elizabeth House,  
21 St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LA.