

December 27, 1984

A PLAN FOR RESCUING STARVING ETHIOPIANS

INTRODUCTION

Americans are horrified by televised pictures of starving Ethiopians. These have struck a deep chord in the national psyche. Confronted with a human catastrophe of such magnitude, Americans are naturally and admirably eager to offer aid. Clearly, something must be done--perhaps a gigantic rescue mission on a scale unseen since the Hoover Relief program in Russia in 1921-1923.¹ Relief proposals apparently are brewing in the Reagan Administration and in Congress with estimated costs running up to \$1 billion.

In its rush to compassion, the United States should not blind itself to the causes of the Ethiopian famine. Relief efforts should be crafted to end--not merely alleviate--the threat of famine in Ethiopia. Its food problems must be solved and not exacerbated by policies that transform a temporary disaster into a permanent one by encouraging continued dependence on external relief.

The relief effort thus must meet several criteria:

1) starvation in Ethiopia must be ended as quickly and completely as possible;

2) the relief effort must be international, recognizing that every nation has a moral obligation to help those starving;

¹ The Hoover relief mission sustained more than ten million Russians at the height of the famine. Benjamin Weissman, Herbert Hoover and Famine Relief in Soviet Russia: 1921-1923 (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution, 1974), p. 199.

- 3) it must recognize that the United Nations is not capable of organizing the relief;
- 4) steps must be taken to prevent future famines in Ethiopia;
- 5) the repressive Ethiopian communist regime must not be allowed to exploit U.S. relief efforts to gain credit for itself or for its Soviet patron; and
- 6) the American charitable impulse and generosity must not be squandered.

Today Ethiopia is wracked by a famine that threatens the lives of up to seven million of its 33 million people. An estimated 300,000 Ethiopians already have starved to death; fatalities are believed to be mounting by 15,000 each week. Ethiopia claims that it will need 1.2 million tons of food aid through 1985. Roughly one-quarter of this amount had been pledged by late November, mainly by American (210,000 tons) and European donors.² More help is needed. The U.S., as the world's leading food-exporting nation, should play a major role in the international relief effort.

But before the U.S. launches major famine relief, it should take care to learn the lessons of past international relief programs. The results of such efforts have been uneven, particularly in famine areas controlled by communist regimes more concerned with preserving their own power than with rushing emergency aid to their peoples. In the Ethiopian rescue mission, donors must ensure that food supplies actually reach the Ethiopians in dire need, not just those deemed politically acceptable to the government. Absolutely no Ethiopian manipulation of food relief supplies for political reasons should be tolerated.

Americans must be assured, moreover, that their relief efforts are not vitiated by the demonstrated incompetence of the Ethiopian government and the weaknesses of existing international relief organizations. This means that the U.S. must establish and operate its own relief mission in Ethiopia to supervise distribution of food and to safeguard supplies of food from the Ethiopian bureaucracy.

All nations must be asked to help Ethiopia. None should be exempt from this moral obligation. Even Ethiopia's poor neighbors have something to offer, as do the communist countries of Europe and Asia. Rescuing starving Ethiopians is not solely the responsibility of the U.S. and other Western nations. To mobilize such a global effort, Ronald Reagan should convene a Council of Ambassadors, an ad hoc committee comprised of all nations that have representatives in Washington plus those that desire to send

² The Washington Post, November 29, 1984, p. A35.

representatives to the meeting. Such a Council would be able to function unencumbered by the bureaucracy, ideology, and posturing that paralyze the United Nations; for flawed policies advocated by the U.N. are in part responsible for the famine in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa.

Finally, the international rescue mission must contribute to the long-term solution of Ethiopia's food problems. Anything less would be the equivalent of offering band-aids to a bleeding hemophiliac. Such actions may temporarily assuage troubled consciences, but they do little to assist permanent recovery.

FACTS OF THE FAMINE

Fact #1: Ethiopian Policies Share the Blame.

Although chronic drought has been the major contributing factor to the famine, acts of men have transformed this into a calamity. Adverse weather conditions set the stage for Ethiopia's disaster, but it is the political priorities of Ethiopia's dictator, Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, that have crippled Ethiopian agriculture and reduced its ability to cope with the drought.

Since seizing power in a 1974 military coup, Mengistu has outlawed traditional agricultural practices and severely disrupted peasant patterns of food production without providing a workable alternative. He instituted a land reform under the slogan "land to the tiller" but installed a fixed price system that drained the tiller's motivation to produce and market food surpluses. The state kept farm prices artificially low to hold down the costs of feeding the burgeoning Ethiopian Army, now the largest in black Africa with 250,000 troops.

The Mengistu regime channels 90 percent of agricultural investment into inefficient state farms that produce only 6 percent of the nation's grain.³ Virtually no land has been irrigated, and little has been done to correct such environmentally destructive practices as deforestation and overgrazing that accelerate soil erosion and degrade agricultural productivity.⁴ Marxist rule drove thousands of talented technocrats into exile, including agricultural scientists whose Western training made them suspect in the eyes of Ethiopia's Marxist rulers.

Not only has the Mengistu regime failed to develop policies to minimize the effects of the drought but it has hamstrung the ability of Ethiopia's peasants--85 percent of the population--to cushion themselves against food shortages. Traditionally,

³ Paul Henze, "Ethiopia," Wilson Quarterly, Winter 1984, p. 724.

⁴ New York Times, November 18, 1984, p. 18.

Ethiopian peasants have saved food in good years to prepare for bad harvests. The government outlawed this practice, branding it as hoarding. Peasants traditionally invested money earned from surplus crops in their own farms to expand production. This was denounced as capitalist accumulation. Independent food traders traditionally bought food in food-surplus areas and transported it to markets in food-deficient areas. This was outlawed as exploitation, and government commissions replaced the free market.

The regime's oppressive economic policies and repressive political program provoked rebellion in Tigray province and elsewhere while renewing the determination of the Eritrean guerrillas, who have battled the Ethiopian army intermittently since 1962. Mengistu has ruled out a negotiated settlement with the Eritreans and Tigrayans, although they have signalled a willingness to end armed struggle in return for greater autonomy. Mengistu's stubborn prosecution of these stalemated wars in the northern highland provinces has produced large, unproductive refugee populations, hindered the sowing and harvesting of crops, disrupted food distribution, diverted manpower from food-growing activities, and imposed a heavy defense burden estimated to be one-third to one-half of the national budget. Ending the intractable fighting in the northern provinces would go far toward reducing the threat of famine.

Fact #2: Africa Embraced Policies Doomed to Fail.

The spectre of famine is not limited to Ethiopia. Many other African states suffer from drought, civil war, and damaging government economic policies. By one count, 36 African states face food shortages this year, with Ethiopia, Chad, Somalia, and Kenya the hardest hit.⁵ Africa has the highest rate of population growth in the world, but per capita food production declined by 10 percent during the 1970s. Although the Sahel drought and the world recession contributed to the decline, the prime reason for falling agricultural productivity was misguided domestic policies.

African governments favored centrally directed industrialization at the expense of agriculture. They have been hostile to free market economic strategies. Centralized governments have established monopolies on buying and selling food, experimented with costly schemes to collectivize agriculture, and subsidized food prices to mollify urban populations--the loci of political power. Because peasants had little political influence, they bore the brunt of these policies. Artificially low prices gave them little incentive to expand food production and left them with little cash to buy fertilizer or maintain equipment.

⁵ The Guardian, October 31, 1984.

Marxist economic policies that had failed miserably when practiced in the Soviet bloc nonetheless were imported by African governments. International organizations such as the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) promoted flawed agricultural policies that ignored the important role of the private sector in food production.⁶ In one sense, today's food crisis in Africa is the harvest of Soviet and socialist policies embraced by African regimes. Moscow and Beijing convinced Africa to follow their examples, and Africa is now paying a heavy price for having done so.

It is no coincidence that Ethiopia, one of the most doctrinaire Marxist states in Africa, is suffering the continent's most severe famine. Perhaps the only beneficial side effect of the Ethiopian tragedy is that diplomats at the Organization of African Unity headquarters in Addis Ababa, only miles away from the edge of the famine areas, will inform their governments of the shortcomings of Ethiopia's agricultural strategy. Farmers, like all workers, must be motivated, not indoctrinated. Food production can be expanded most effectively through economic incentives given to free men, not coercion imposed on reluctant collectives.

Fact #3: The West Is Not to Blame.

The Mengistu regime repeatedly has berated Western nations for allegedly failing to provide enough food aid even as tons of food from the West was pouring in. At the same time, Mengistu has praised the Soviets "for their unselfish and timely relief"--even though Moscow and its allies have provided Ethiopia with little food but much weaponry. Praise for the stingy Soviets coupled with reprimands for the generous West prompted M. Peter McPherson, director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, to warn Ethiopia not to bite the hand that feeds it. Yet the Mengistu regime is attempting to use Western donor nations as scapegoats for its own disastrous economic policies. Mengistu is painfully aware that the ineffective response of Haile Selassie's government to the 1973-1974 famine undermined its support and created conditions that led to the Emperor's overthrow in 1974. The current famine has already claimed more Ethiopian lives than the one that prompted Selassie's downfall--an ominous sign for Mengistu.

If the West is morally responsible for Ethiopia's food crisis, it is not due to a lack of charity but to its lack of courage when it acquiesced to and indirectly financed ruinous economic and social experiments in Ethiopia and Africa.⁷ Between

⁶ See Georges Fauriol, The Food and Agriculture Organization: A Flawed Strategy In the War Against Hunger (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1984).

⁷ See Patrick Buchanan, "The Destruction of Africa," Washington Times, November 20, 1984.

1978 and 1982 the Mengistu regime received \$1 billion in Western aid, the bulk of it through multilateral agencies, which made explicit accountability impossible.⁸ This aid helped Mengistu suppress private enterprise and supplant it with state monopolies. Much of the aid was "routinely diverted into projects designed to bolster Colonel Mengistu's regime."⁹

In 1982, the Ethiopians were warned of impending famine by a U.N.-sponsored study directed by Keith Griffin of Oxford University. The study recommended immediate food rationing and a shift in agricultural investment away from state farms to local projects run by local peasant associations. According to Griffin, the Mengistu government rejected the study's findings because it could not tolerate autonomous local groups. The U.N. agency sponsoring the research acquiesced to the suppression of the report.¹⁰

Over the past 20 years, Western aid programs have poured over \$80 billion into African countries.¹¹ The tragedy is the sad lack of lasting benefits from this massive generosity. The economies of most of these countries stagnate or decline because of domestic economic policies based on ideology or short-term political goals. Tanzania, for example, probably has received more per capita Western aid than any country in the world, yet its pursuit of socialism has crippled its economy and imposed extraordinary hardship on its people.

Fact #4: Ethiopia Mishandles Famine Relief.

Until recently, the Mengistu regime assigned low priority to famine relief. The government-controlled press made little of the famine in the months before this past September's elaborate ceremonies celebrating the tenth anniversary of the 1974 revolution. Many observers believe that the regime minimized the extent of the famine to avoid tarnishing the revolution's image and embarrassing the more than 50 Communist Party delegations that participated in the \$150 million to \$200 million gala. The festivities also marked the founding of the Ethiopian Communist Party. Catholic Relief Services officials estimate that 250 people in Ethiopia's northern provinces starved to death each day during the lavish festivities.¹²

Ethiopian authorities for a long time refused to grant preferential treatment to Western food shipments in congested Ethiopian ports. Soviet cargo ships carrying cement were given

⁸ The Times (London), November 12, 1984.

⁹ Philip Jacobson, "Famine's Fatal Combination--Red Tape, Gold Braid," The Times (London), November 10, 1984.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Frederick Stokeld, "Africa and Foreign Aid," Orbis, Winter 1982, p. 996.

¹² Washington Times, November 6, 1984.

priority over ships carrying Western food relief.¹³ And then, when donated food supplies finally were unloaded, the Ethiopians charged an import tax of \$12.50 a ton, plus handling and trucking charges of \$165 a ton.¹⁴ Tons of food have rotted at Red Sea ports for lack of the means to transport it inland.¹⁵ At one point almost half of the 500 trucks of the inefficient Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission were out of service because of the lack of spare parts. Few Ethiopian officials are willing or able to assume responsibility because of the lack of trained manpower and the rigidity of the overcentralized, labyrinthine Ethiopian bureaucracy.

Once food shipments reach the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, accountability ends. Food supplies have been diverted, and many times, have disappeared. Reports of abuses are rampant. In late 1983 a senior official of the Commission defected to Sudan with evidence of a cover-up concerning 15,000 tons of missing food aid.¹⁶ Relief food has been used to pay laborers in lieu of salary.¹⁷ Ethiopian soldiers in Eritrea are reported to be selling relief food.¹⁸ The "People's Militia" in that province is paid in grain--up to 120 kilos per month.¹⁹ In effect, the brutal Mengistu regime is subsidizing its war in Eritrea by siphoning off relief aid.

Fact #5: Many Starving Ethiopians Are Denied Food.

An estimated 60 to 80 percent of Ethiopia's starving are located in rural areas controlled by Eritrean and Tigrayan rebel forces.²⁰ Since the government does not sanction relief operations in these areas, most Western relief agencies refuse to provide food supplies to rebel areas for fear of jeopardizing their relief operations elsewhere in Ethiopia. Although several relief agencies have initiated shoestring relief programs through neighboring Sudan, famine victims in Eritrea and Tigray have received much less aid than other Ethiopians.

To save their people from starvation, rebel leaders have announced their willingness to negotiate a cease-fire to permit external relief operations to function safely. The Mengistu

¹³ New York Times, September 20, 1984, p. A14.

¹⁴ Flora Lewis, "A Moral Test in Ethiopia," New York Times, November 9, 1984.

¹⁵ The Washington Post, November 3, 1984, p. A1.

¹⁶ London Sunday Times, December 4, 1983.

¹⁷ Christian Science Monitor, July 20, 1984, p. 31.

¹⁸ The Guardian, November 10, 1984.

¹⁹ George Galloway, "The Mengistu Famine," Spectator, December 1, 1984, p. 8.

²⁰ Dan Connell, "Famine and Politics," Christian Science Monitor, November 19, 1984.

