

African Recovery Program

Near the town of Mopti in Central Mali in late August 1984, an 11-year-old boy trudged a few metres into the desert, lay down on the parched, dry earth and died. On that day in Africa, he was only one of thousands of victims who succumbed to the worst drought and famine to hit the continent since the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, several thousand kilometres away in Ethiopia, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television crew was completing a video segment on the human cost of the same drought and famine that was spreading through the entire sub-Saharan region — a tragedy that had already devastated hundreds of thousands of lives. These television images — aired in Europe and North America a few weeks later — made the catastrophe a vivid nightmare for Westerners. The heart-wrenching pictures of children too weak to smile, of mothers too weary to weep, of men too defeated to search for one last morsel of food changed forever the romantic image of Africa that so many Westerners had held for so long. They also unleashed a series of events which led Canada and other members of the United Nations to adopt one of the most far-reaching and comprehensive continental recovery programs ever undertaken.

Canada's response to the African crisis as well as its role in the formulation and implementation of the UN recovery program was both critical and dynamic.

When the graphic images of the tragedy that was ravaging central Africa were broadcast into the homes of Canadians, thousands were galvanized into support of the government's major relief effort. The Canadian International Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre were given the responsibility for providing massive funds and assistance for immediate relief. Canadian grain and other foodstuffs, medical equipment, trucks and transport aircraft, and expert personnel were immediately rushed to Ethiopia and elsewhere in the region to join in the co-operative emergency effort with 22 other countries. From October 1984 to July 1985 this relief program saved over a million people from starvation.

At UN headquarters in New York City, Canada was assigned the critical task of chairing the meeting of the Special Session of the General Assembly, convened in June 1986, to deal with the African situation. The Canadian delegation, under the leadership of Ambassador Stephen Lewis, was successful in guiding the contentious and difficult Special Session to a consensus adoption of the UN Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development. A landmark in international co-operation, this program established a practical and concrete plan for the economic and social rehabilitation of an entire continent — with the courageous objective of taking it from drought, dust and devastation to relative economic stability in five short years.

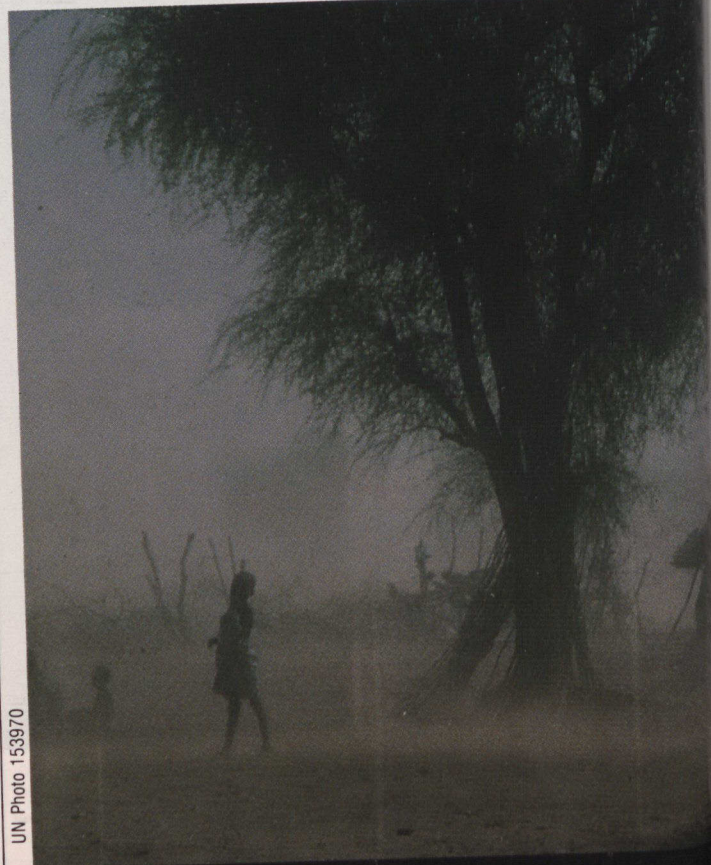
Canada also took the lead in implementing the program, working closely with the UN in New York, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, other donor countries and most importantly Canadian and international non-governmental organizations which, in many cases, provided the most effective and immediate on-site relief in Africa.

The overwhelming response of Canadians to the 1984 African crisis and their continued support for the African Recovery Programme have been demonstrated in the emergence of grassroots organizations throughout the country, ranging from a church group on Vancouver Island to grain co-operatives on the prairies to a fishermen's union in Nova Scotia.

They represent an ongoing and heartfelt Canadian response to the plight of the desperate millions on the African continent.

This commitment has been strengthened in response to the recent reoccurrence of the drought and famine in Ethiopia, the Sudan, and elsewhere in the region. The Canadian people and government will continue to respond and to work with the United Nations and other international organizations in an attempt to provide the people of Africa with a future free from the spectre of drought and starvation.

Fighting the spread of drought and famine: the UN African Recovery Program.



UN Photo 153970