

Famine and war a double tragedy

by Kent Cochrane

While the famine in Ethiopia has received massive coverage in the Western media, little attention has been paid to the fact that no aid has been reaching the people in the province of Eritrea in northern Ethiopia.

The situation in Eritrea is a double tragedy, since as well as the famine, a war has raged there for the last 24 years between a liberation movement and the Ethiopian government.

Aseworki Mekonnen, the chairman of the Edmonton branch of the Eritrea Relief Association, spoke to the Gateway Tuesday about Eritrea.

According to Mekonnen, some 85 per cent of Eritrea is under the control of the Eritrean Liberation Movement, with the Ethiopian government controlling only the Eritrean capital of Asmara and a few other major cities.

"For all practical purposes, no aid is reaching the countryside of Eritrea," said Mekonnen.

On the other side, he said, the government is simply unable to reach most of the Eritreans affected by the famine, but on the other hand, it doesn't want to since it is already fighting a war against them.

"The famine is being used as a weapon by the government," said Mekonnen.

He added that the government maintains strict control over the activities of the international aid organizations operating within the country and does not allow them access to Eritrea.

The Eritrea Relief Association and other groups do manage to bring some aid in through Sudan, which borders Eritrea to the north west.

However, Mekonnen noted that some two million Eritreans have been affected by the famine, and over one million are in urgent need of assistance if they are to avoid starvation.

The war in Eritrea began in 1962 when Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie abrogated Eritrea's status as an autonomous region associated with Ethiopia, and made it an integral province of the Ethiopian empire.

Eritrea had been federated with Ethiopia only since 1952, having been an Italian colony until 1941 and under British administration between 1941 and 1952.

In that year the United Nations, which was also deciding the fates of

ERITREA



Famine and Resistance

the former Italian colonies of Libya and Somalia, made Eritrea an autonomous unit under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian emperor.

The liberation movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, was supported for years by the USSR, while the U.S. supplied arms to the Ethiopian government.

However, in 1977, while fighting another rebellion in the Ogaden desert in southern Ethiopia, the government expelled its U.S. military advisors and began accepting massive aid from the Soviet Union.



Mekonnen, Edmonton chair of Eritrea Relief Association

As well, thousands of Cuban troops were sent to Ethiopia to fight against the Somali-backed rebels in the Ogaden, who wanted to secede from Ethiopia.

Mekonnen said that there is no concrete evidence that the Cubans have also fought directly against the Eritreans.

"However, the same cannot be said of the Russians."

Russian officers are directing military operations in Eritrea and Russian pilots are flying planes and helicopter gunships against the

rebels, said Mekonnen.

South Yemenese soldiers and officers are also directly involved in the fighting in Eritrea, he added.

Some 400,000 Eritrean refugees have fled to Sudan because of the war and the famine.

Mekonnen felt that the lack of press coverage until recently of the famine in Ethiopia, where a drought has lasted since 1979, was caused by the lack of interest and initiative by the Ethiopian government, which feared bad publicity since it would expose its economic and political failures.

Now, however, with worldwide knowledge of the disastrous proportions of the famine, the government is helping to publicize the famine in order to capitalize on international aid, some of which has allegedly gone to government troops.

Peter Matilainen, a member of the East European Solidarity Committee, said the war in Eritrea does not fit the view of the world as a struggle between East and West.

He noted that the U.S.S.R., which once supported the Eritrean liberation movement, abandoned it as soon as the Ethiopian military junta sought the U.S.S.R.'s support.

He also said that the Eritrean struggle has continued despite the fact that both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. have supported the Ethiopian government.

In order to help increase public awareness of the situation in Eritrea, the East European Solidarity Committee are sponsoring a program on the war and famine in Eritrea on Friday, Mar. 1, at 7:30 p.m. in Education North 2-115.

This program will feature two films, *Alone Against the Mighty* and *War and Drought* as well as speakers from the Eritrea Relief Association and the Campus Eritrean Support Committee.

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