

Reflections on the Tra

By STEVEN DUTCHER

Late last fall, the attention of the students of UNB/STU was focused upon the plight of the starving people of Ethiopia. As television carried dramatic pictures of the actual suffering, students were given the opportunity to help the starving people through the hunger strike of Rick Hutchins, and the activities of "Students Help Ethiopia." The tremendous response, not only by students, but by the university communities, brought a welcome change, as compassion and concern for the unfortunate became a major part of student life.

Yet once Rick reached his goal of \$10,000, and as the question of Ethiopia faded from the television screens (and our minds), the compassion and concern which had provided such life at UNB/STU seemed to disappear. Perhaps the major reason for this was that our concern and compassion for the starving Ethiopians was based upon a shallow and misleading perception of the causes of that tremendous suffering, a perception that has been portrayed as truth in our mass media.

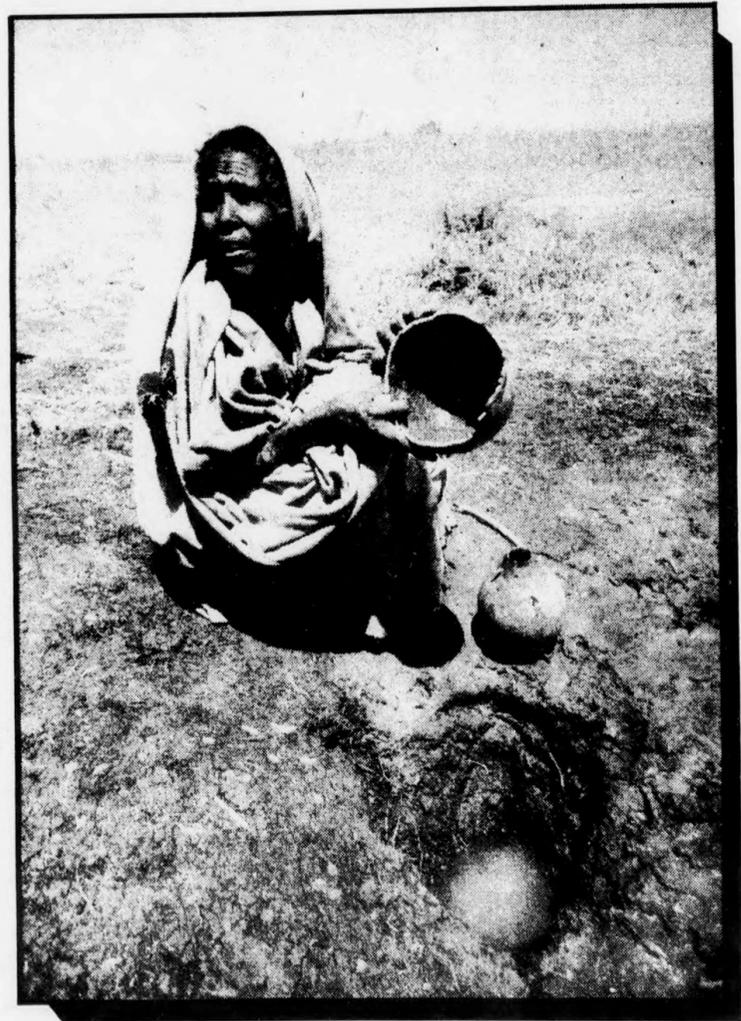
Following the mass media's lead, most people's perception of the tragedy in Ethiopia is based on certain assumptions which are, indeed, quite unfounded in fact. The main causes of the starvation, for instance, are generally viewed as being drought, the workings of a "Marxist" government, and the indifference of the richer countries to provide aid. No doubt all of these factors played a part, but to talk only of these things is to ignore the true dimensions of hunger and starvation not only in Ethiopia, but also around the world.

Hunger is, of course, not restricted to Ethiopia, nor even Africa — it is a worldwide phenomenon. The United Nations has estimated that one out of every eight people in this world, or 500 million people, are literally starving to death. And fully one-half of the people in this world are malnourished. The terrible suffering which these statistics entail is hard to comprehend, and it is often only when we are moved by such things as the horrifying pictures on television that this suffering is made real to us.

Hungry people — even those that are starving — do not only exist, however, in "hungry countries". There are hungry and starving people in every country of this world. Even in the United States, which is generally considered to be the wealthiest country, there are "at least 10 to 12 million Americans who are starving or sick because they have too little to spend on food." (1972 figures from US Bureau of Census). The main difference between countries in this world is not that some are "hungry," and that others are not, but that in the underdeveloped (or Third World) countries, hunger and starvation constantly threaten half or more of the entire population, whereas in the developed (or First and Second World) countries, hunger and starvation threaten a much lesser proportion of the total population.

What is often forgotten is that it is only the poor, of whatever country, who face hunger and starvation. It is only the poor who cannot grow enough or buy enough food to feed themselves. This simple, yet often-forgotten truth — that it is only the poor who are hungry — stands up even in times of severe hunger, or famine.

Take the case, for example, of Ethiopia. If one looks at what has happened in just the past twenty years, one can see some disturbing trends. Ethiopia is part of the Sahel (Arabic for "edge"), which forms the southern border of the Sahara Desert in Africa. Other countries in the "Sahel" include Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Upper Volta, Niger, and Chad, countries which are undergoing basically the same famine threat as Ethiopia this year. In the early seventies, there was another terrible famine in the Sahel, one in which hundreds of thousands of people starved to death, and which, like the famine this year, focused the attention of the world upon the region. Then, like today, the major cause of the famine was seen to be drought, an explanation which was later discredited by a study called *Nature Pleads Not Guilty*. Moreover, studies have turned up some surprising statistics. One study, by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, documented that *each* Sahelian country, during the severe famine of the early seventies, produced enough grain to feed its total population. In addition, these Sahelian coun-



tries have, despite being characterized by chronic hunger, almost two and one-half acres of cultivated land per person (more than either the United States or the Soviet Union)

Yet hundreds of thousands of people starved to death in these countries in the early seventies. The obvious question is why? Why, if there was enough grain produced to feed everyone, and plenty of land was cultivated, did hundreds of thousands starve?

There are many reasons — historical, political, economic, and social — why people go hungry and even starve in the Sahel or any other part of the world. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into these reasons, but it is perhaps sufficient to say that peo-

ple go hungry and even starve because the access to land to grow their own food, or the price of the available food. That access to food resources is restricted by those who control the system. Often it is the governments of these countries whose agricultural policies promote both cash crops for export instead of food on the land, and "cheap food" for urban consumers, while the rural farmers in poverty. It is also often the "merchants" who, in controlling the movement of food from the farms, use the "cheap food" policy to manipulate the market, while at the same time manipulating the price to consumers so as to achieve a higher profit. It is the poor who lose out, whether they