

# Citizens of the World

Ethiopia; and the mind freezes.

Frightening images of dying and of the dead brought into our living rooms by the "magic of television." The countries of East and West react, but far too late. There are no easy, patch-up solutions. Were we talking about a simple famine, perhaps there would be a simple remedy. Ethiopia is, however, not just a country with little food and many people.

This famine, its manifestations and its causes have been with us for decades. Most people paid little attention to the problems, either ignoring the country (and most of the Third World, for that matter) or focusing on the political aspects in an extension of the East/West struggle. And political aspects *do* abound. From the middle of the century until the mid-70's, Ethiopia was ruled by the Emperor Haile Selassie... As one might expect, mismanagement is the operative word for this period. Millions of hectares of land were claimed by the government; most of it was doled out to whoever happened to catch Selassie's favour. Much of the land was left uncultivated. On top of this, the government and landlords collected taxes of 50% (and sometimes more) on the produce of the people. There was no way for individuals to put away food for the recurring periods of drought.



Due to the desperate need for food and firewood, rational agricultural planning never stood a chance. Deforestation went on at ridiculous rates. Because of this, erosion has become a major problem. With a growing population and all the "spare land" in the hands of Selassie et. al., the peasants were required to resort to cultivating land of poor quality. Further, they could not afford the luxury of allowing fields to lie fallow and so many tracts were soon incapable of producing food. In order to plough slope land, more oxen than normal were need; this led, of course, to heavier strain on grazing lands. As the firewood supply dwindled, more and more manure was burned, thus depriving the land of fertilizer.

In 1962, the Selassie government annexed the former Italian colony of Eritrea. This northern "province" has been at war with the Ethiopian government ever since.

All in all, a pretty nasty business.

The famine of 1972-74 (200,000 estimated to have died) and the oil-price shock of 1973 spelled the end for the Selassie regime. A Marxist government under Mengistu Hail Mariam took over in 1973; it nationalized all property in 1975 causing

Canada, the US and Britain to end their aid programmes. Canada resumed its role in 1980, Britain gave aid through the EEC and the US has recently restarted its aid programme. Aid is the only route for Ethiopia to take as it is one of the ten poorest nations on Earth.

The present Marxist regime has not been much more successful than the monarchy in feeding the people. It attempted some land reforms but finds it difficult to cope, with the war still on. Mengistu recently rejected a call by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front for a cease-fire so that food and medical supplies can be effectively distributed in the north. Mengistu claimed that the "terrorists", as he refers to them, are not "an obstacle to the implementation of relief efforts." External Affairs Minister Joe Clark seems to have been impressed by how effectively supplies are being distributed. Still, with a lack of trucks and good roads, more and more supplies are being flown in directly by the donor governments and many private groups are steering clear of the Mengistu government by sending their aid through the Sudan.

At present about 9 million people are immediately threatened. It is estimated 1.2 million tonnes of grain will be needed by these people over the next 12 months. Within 6 to 12 months, another 6 million people in the southern region of Harage will be facing the same catastrophe as we hear about on the evening news today. Another 500,000 tonnes will be needed there. Further, death does not come only in the form of starvation. There is amoebic dysentery since most of what water there is is filthy. Typhus and pneumonia are also problems as most people are too weak to fight off disease. Dehydration, of course, as a result of the famine. Cold nights, poor shelters and lack of firewood lead to hypothermia. Perhaps the most bitter death is by cardiac arrest; many die after being fed simply because their bodies cannot stand the shock of food.

Ethiopia is dying because she could not stave off this disaster by herself and because the rest of the world was largely indifferent. Governments played politics and most people simply ignored the problems, a sign of our mainstream selfishness. There were those who tried to help and they *have* saved lives, due to them we can be grateful. The rest of us had to be spurred on, not through the magic, but through the horror of television. Our money, our time can help, but as one journalist put it, we are engrossed in "post-mortem" activities. Still, this is no reason to give up, to "cut our losses."

Ironically, many people recognize now that it would have been less expensive in terms of dollars to supply Ethiopia with aid a couple of years ago than it is to feed her in the midst of this terrible famine. Money could have, should have, been spent on water projects, building up food supplies, land rehabilitation and medical work in the late 1970's and early 80's; the famine was not unforeseen.

Hopefully, we will remember, after picking up the pieces of Ethiopia, that prevention of this sort of disaster costs fewer dollars than the mop-up work. It is also a helluva lot less expensive in terms of lives.

