

## 9. "ECONOMIC WAR" ON THE PEASANTS AND FAMINE

It is widely recognized that the agricultural and economic policies of the Ethiopian government contributed to the creation of the famine. An assessment of the merits and demerits of such policies mostly lies outside the mandate of a human rights organization, with a few significant exceptions such as the brutal manner in which many of the policies were implemented, and the lack of any channel for debating issues of national importance and thereby changing policy.

This chapter will cover some of these areas of human rights abuse, and also the broader issues of agricultural and economic policy. The latter is important for two reasons. One is that it is necessary to assess the entire range of the man-made factors that created famine, so that the role of human rights abuse can be placed properly in context. The second is that the demonstration of the disastrous consequences of these policies should mean that on any future occasions when they are knowingly followed, and duly create famine, it will not be possible for their proponents to defend themselves with the claim that they acted in good faith, but in ignorance of the consequences of their actions.

### The Logic of Food Supplies

The Dergue seized power in 1974 during a wave of popular revulsion at the corruption of the rule of Haile Selassie. Some aspects of the revolutionary government were radically new, but in certain respects it faced similar problems to its predecessor and responded in similar ways.

One important stimulus to the revulsion against the ancien regime was the discovery of the famine in Wollo by the British television journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, whose film "The Unknown Famine" shocked the western world into acting, and the Ethiopian government into admitting the problem for the first time. Dimbleby's pictures of destitution and extreme hunger are difficult to watch even today, for those who have become accustomed to pictures of the 1980s famines. On September 11, 1974, the day before the Emperor was deposed, excerpts from the film were shown interspliced with footage from the wedding of the daughter of a prominent government minister, for which the cake had been specially flown from Italy. The following day, as the Emperor was driven from his palace in the back seat of a Volkswagen beetle, the crowds shouted *lieba!* -- "thief!"

Haile Selassie's symbols of Imperial authority were shattered for ever. The Dergue at first tried to claim legitimacy through slogans referring to "Ethiopia first" and "Ethiopian

socialism." If these were not to be wholly empty, radical measures were needed. One such measure that was adopted was the creation of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), a well-funded government department, assisted by expatriate advisors as well as Ethiopian experts, to prevent future famines, distribute relief to the victims of natural adversity, and rehabilitate those left destitute by the famines of 1972-4.<sup>1</sup> Another slogan was "Land to the tiller," which led to the land reform proclamation of March 1975, in which private ownership of land was abolished, and with it all the feudal exactions that had so oppressed the peasantry. It was optimistically hoped that the creation of the RRC, together with other radical measures, would banish famine from Ethiopia altogether.

While the ideology of the new government was radically different from its predecessor, and some of its actions were truly revolutionary, the economic constraints it faced were similar. It needed to feed the cities, especially Addis Ababa, and the army.

Before the land reform of 1975, most farmers in the south paid a large proportion of their crop to landlords in the form of rent. This payment then constituted the bulk of the food that was marketed in the main towns. After the land reform act was promulgated, this was no longer the case -- much of the food was kept by the farmers for their own consumption. Meanwhile, in the urban areas, wages stagnated and the price of food rose fast. Standards of living for industrial workers dropped by between one third and one half between 1974 and 1979. Economists argued that this warranted drastic interventions by the government to purchase staple grains. Placating the urban population was also an important political priority for the government.

After 1977, the rapidly-growing army also needed to be supplied with food. An army of 300,000 people consumes a minimum of 60,000 tons of grain per year.

The government adopted an array of strategies to deal with its food problem. Its ultimate aim was the complete transformation of the Ethiopian peasant farmers into workers on state-run cooperatives. This was never achieved, though two ambitious attempts were made in the later 1980s to move rapidly in that direction -- resettlement and villagization -- which are the subject of later chapters.

During the period 1978-84, the main government strategies included:

- \* The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was set up in 1976, had its powers dramatically expanded.
- \* Heavy and even punitive taxes were levied.
- \* Strict controls on the private grain trade were enforced.

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<sup>1</sup> The RRC was in fact created by Haile Selassie, already bowing to the revolutionary tide, as almost his last act as emperor.

- \* Restrictions on peasants' movement and laboring were enforced.
- \* State farms were developed, using forced labor.
- \* The RRC was mandated to transform destitute populations into a potential collectivized workforce, and to obtain food from the international community.

These policies, which amounted to an economic war on the independent peasantry waged by the state, were instrumental in creating vulnerability to famine well beyond the area of counter-insurgency operations.

### **The Agricultural Marketing Corporation**

The activities of the AMC were described by a peasant in Wollo as "robbing the poor to feed the rich."<sup>2</sup>

The government set up the AMC in 1976 and gave it increasing powers over the following years. AMC operations were gradually extended to all the major crop-producing regions. By 1980, it was purchasing over 400,000 metric tonnes (MT) of food per annum, two thirds of it from Peasant Associations (PAs). In 1982/3, 573,000 MT was procured. Each PA was given a quota of grain which it had to supply -- but was not informed how large its quota would be until after the planting season.<sup>3</sup> From the 1980/1 season onwards, the price for each type of grain was fixed centrally and was the same in all parts of the country. In 1980, the prices decided upon by the government were about 20-25% lower than those advised by economists,<sup>4</sup> and stayed at the same level for eight years, despite fast inflation in the prices on the open market. In 1984, the fixed price was only about 20% of the free market price in Addis Ababa. The quotas were also centrally determined, and often bore little relation to the size of the harvest. In Wollo, the quota remained unchanged at 23,000 MT in 1982 and 1983. Local officials in the Ministry of Agriculture objected to the quota and the AMC's inflexible demands for prompt delivery to collection points, but the AMC was unmoved, arguing that there had been an adequate harvest. (The harvest was of course adequate, but the AMC quota was set at a level above the disposable surplus, and other government policies were endangering the survival

<sup>2</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, "Famine and Survival Strategies: A Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, Institute of Development Research (IDR), 1987, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> S. Franzel, Legesse Dachi, F. Colburn and Getahun Degu, "Grain Marketing and Peasant Production in Ethiopia," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1989, pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Alemayehu Lirensso, "Grain Marketing and Pricing in Ethiopia: A Study of the Impact of Grain Quota and Fixed Grain Prices on Grain Producers," Addis Ababa, IDR, 1987, p. 38.

of the people.) In the drought year of 1984 the quota fell to 6,000 MT (the government was still taking food out of famine-stricken Wollo) but was reinstated at a high level in 1985/6.

In theory, market mechanisms could have provided the food that the government needed. In practice, the government was not prepared to wait for the time such measures would have needed to work, and its Marxist ideology was also hostile to the free market.

Delivery quotas to the AMC were set for each PA. All farmers, regardless of the size of their harvest, had to meet their quota. "Even the poorest of the poor had to sell" complained one Wollo farmer bitterly.<sup>5</sup> If they failed, the punishment could be confiscation of assets or imprisonment. One study estimated that as a result, half of the grain taken by the AMC was not "surplus," but was taken from basic household reserves.<sup>6</sup> The same study found that as many as a quarter of the peasants were forced to buy grain in order to meet their quotas. They had to buy on the open market, often selling essential assets in order to raise the money, and then sell at a considerable loss to the AMC -- which often only made its payments many months later. Many other peasants had to buy grain later in order to have grain to eat later in the season. Some young farmers even abandoned their land and went to look for work on state farms, because the burden of delivering their quotas was so heavy that they could not afford to save to set themselves up with an ox and a plow.

Dr Dessalegn Rahmato calculated that a typical peasant in Ambassel, Wollo, harvested 14.7 quintals<sup>7</sup> of grain per year, of which 5.8 quintals were paid to the AMC, leaving 8.9 quintals -- about the bare minimum for a family of five to survive on. Of the harvest of 6 quintals of pulses, 2.15 were taken by the AMC.<sup>8</sup> If the harvest were below average, the family would suffer a shortfall -- on the basis of this exaction alone.

The grain procured by the AMC was supposed to be resold throughout the country. In Harerghe, the distribution quotas were 30% to the towns, 30% to PAs, 29% to pastoralists, 10% to government institutions, and one per cent to private agencies.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was destined solely for the larger towns -- in Harerghe, 100 per cent went to Dire Dawa and Harer towns -- and the army. In 1984, the AMC's only and belated response to the food shortage in Wollo was to

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Cutler and John Mitchell, "An Evaluation of BandAid Funded Agricultural Inputs Distribution Programmes in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," London, 1987, pp. 43-4.

<sup>6</sup> Alemayehu Lirensso, 1987, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> One quintal is 100 kilograms.

<sup>8</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ashenafi Moges, "Food Shortages in Harerghe Region of Ethiopia," DPhil Thesis, Oxford, 1988, p. 276.

allocate 6,000 MT for distribution in the towns.<sup>10</sup> In the later 1980s, the army took an ever larger share and by 1989, even Addis Ababa was not receiving its AMC quota, which was entirely destined for the military.

A coercive government policy, implemented systematically and often brutally, had the effect of impoverishing many thousands of peasant farmers. Some were reduced to famine conditions, and others to a state in which they could no longer sell food to poorer neighbours or migrants, or offer them employment or other forms of assistance.

## **Taxes and Levies**

The peasants of Ethiopia were subjected to a wide range of taxes and levies. These steadily increased during the late 1970s and 1980s. All farmers were required to pay agricultural income tax (20 Birr), a PA membership fee (minimum 5 Birr), surtax (usually 25 Birr), plus levies for road-building, school-building, literacy and other campaigns. Members of the Women's Association paid a 3 Birr annual membership fee, and all households contributed at least 3 Birr to the Youth Association. School fees ranged from 2 Birr to 15 Birr. Starting in 1984, all were required to pay a levy for the work of the RRC, usually 20-25 Birr. Famine-stricken peasants in Wollo could not fail to see the irony of the enforced payment of this "famine tax" to the government.<sup>11</sup> From 1988 a contribution "for the territorial integrity of the Motherland" was also levied. In addition there were frequent demands for corvee labor (for instance for state farms) and campaign labor (for road-building, reforestation, etc), always levied without regard to the agricultural cycle. These labor demands often averaged one day per week, with fines for non-attendance or ill-discipline. Some taxes were levied by allocating quotas to districts, which decided on the level of individual payments.

Jason Clay of Cultural Survival made an estimate of the total tax burden on farmers in Harerghe, based on interviews with refugees, and produced the extraordinarily high figure of 546.92 Birr per annum -- more than twice the per capita gross national product of Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup> This figure is so high that it needs to be treated with caution, but it is worth noting that about 40 per cent of the total consisted of irregular payments to the PA chairman, cadres and local militia.

In areas of western Wollega recently occupied by the OLF, Dr Trevor Trueman

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Cutler, "The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia," PhD thesis, London, 1988, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Clay, "The Case of Harerghe: The Testimony of Refugees in Somalia," in J. Clay, S. Steingrabber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy Peasant Agriculture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p. 188.

estimated that the tax burden had ranged from 70 Birr to 150 Birr yearly, plus charges for schooling and unofficial payments of health services and other necessities.

Taxation was certainly punitive. Many investigators in rural Ethiopia report peasants being forced to sell crops or animals or go into debt to meet tax payments. In Wollo, after a small remission of taxes in 1984/5 due to the famine, tax payments increased in 1986. Agricultural income tax was levied at a rate of 45 Birr, leading to suspicions that "arrears" were being collected. "Arrears" of taxes were also collected by army patrols in Tigray and north Wollo.

## **Impact of the Policies: Grain Storage**

Traditionally, Ethiopian farmers try to keep a large amount of grain in storage, and will only empty their stores when they are certain of the next harvest. This meant that the complete failure of one year's harvest would not lead to famine. The government policies described above made this impossible by the 1980s. As a result, the harvest failure of 1984 led directly to famine in many parts of the country which were unaffected by war.

## **Restrictions on Trade**

A number of the policies adopted in Tigray and its borderlands for counter-insurgency were later expanded to areas under government control, for reasons of social control and socio-economic transformation. One of these was restrictions on petty trade, especially in grain. Outside insurgent areas, the intention of the policy was to direct as much as possible of the marketed grain to the AMC.

The chapter on the Red Terror has documented the attack on large merchants in the years 1975-8, and the accompanying legislation in the Special Penal Code which acted as a deterrent to legitimate commerce. A welter of petty legislation further restricting the grain trade, much of it at the provincial level, followed after 1978. All trading licenses were issued by the Grain Purchasing Task Force (an affiliate of the AMC). Grain wholesaling became illegal in much of the country, for instance Gojjam after 1982. The number of grain traders declined each year after 1980 -- 1,100 had their licenses revoked in Gojjam in 1982/3,<sup>13</sup> and 342 in Arsi in 1986.<sup>14</sup> Only in 1988 was the trade re-legalized; it was deregulated in March 1990, although transport remained strictly regulated until the fall of the government.

No specific directives were issued relating to traders using pack animals, but the complexities of licensing and the vague definitions of "hoarding" and "profiteering" were sufficient to endorse any local official's attempt to confiscate the goods of a petty trader. One Ethiopian economist noted "it is unclear whether small scale grain trade is illegal or not".<sup>15</sup>

Road blocks were set up on all major and minor routes, in order to check that no unauthorized trade was occurring. In some instances, the "concession" was sold or granted to

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<sup>13</sup> Alemayehu Lirens, 1987, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> Franzel et al, 1989, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Alemayehu Lirens, 1987, p. 52.

avored individuals within the local PA, who would use the income from bribes, fines, confiscations and levies for himself -- providing a clear incentive to obstruct the trade as much as possible. The tariff for a ten-ton truck at a single road block could be as high as 5,000 Birr. Commonly, an individual was restricted to a limited quantity of grain, such as one quintal. The restrictions were also extended to people bearing gifts of grain. In 1984, some residents of Addis Ababa tried to send food to their relatives in the famine zone, only to have the food confiscated at checkpoints.

Starting with the land reform proclamation of 1975, government regulations required "specialization." Each petty-trader was required to make a choice between being a full-time farmer and a full-time trader, and in the event of choosing the latter, to live in a town. As most petty-traders engaged in trade during the dry season when they could not work on their farms, this was a direct attack on their means of survival. This restriction was never fully enforced, but provided another excuse for local officials to exact bribes from traders, or to confiscate mules and grain at will. On the occasions when it was enforced (such as Wollo, starting in 1984) the consequences were even worse.

The government regarded time spent at market as "wasted" or "unproductive," and measures to restrict markets were introduced depending on the zeal and ideological correctness of local administrators and cadres. Some of the cadre's attempts to control trade and marketing in a resettlement site in Wollega included:<sup>16</sup>

- \* Restricting the time people were allowed to spend at a market.
- \* Imposing a synchronization of markets.
- \* Closing small roadside markets.
- \* Defining market days as "work days," so that those who attended markets lost work points in the collective work system of the settlement.
- \* Banning men from attending markets at certain times of year, so that only women could attend.
- \* Banning all attendance at markets during the harvest season, for 2-3 weeks.

Such stringent measures were rare. More commonly, small markets were closed, as being "unnecessary," or changed from twice weekly to weekly. Most markets were synchronized, being held on Saturdays, which prevented traders and peasants attending more than one each week. In some areas, a ban was introduced on peasants attending more than one

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<sup>16</sup> Alula Pankhurst, "Settling for a New World: People and the State in an Ethiopian Resettlement Village," PhD Thesis, Manchester, 1990, p. 332.



market in their locality.

Restrictions were particularly tight in Gonder during 1984. This was related to factors including counter-insurgency operations against TPLF-EPDM, the hard-line administrators in the province and their hostility to private trade, and several scandals involving local officials profiteering in the grain trade. These restrictions were particularly damaging because the 1983 harvest in Gonder was good, and unrestricted trade would have allowed much of the surplus to be redistributed commercially to the famine areas of Tigray and north Wollo.

Before the revolution, there were an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain dealers in the country. In 1984, the Ministry of Domestic Trade had issued licenses to just 4,942, and by law they were required to sell a minimum of half of their purchases to the AMC. Whereas over half the farmers in the TPLF-controlled village of Adiet engaged in trade,<sup>17</sup> only two out of 150 in one study in Harerghe did so,<sup>18</sup> and a similarly small number did so in Wollo.<sup>19</sup>

Markets are critical to peasants' economic activity in normal times, and are absolutely essential to "survival strategies" during famine. By these measures, the rural marketing system was seriously crippled, and the flow of grain from surplus to deficit areas was effectively stemmed. The consequences of this for Tigray (where the restrictions were combined with the bombing of marketplaces) have been mentioned -- comparable, though less severe, damage was done to rural people's survival chances throughout the country.

#### *Restrictions on Moneylending*

A consequence of the restriction on trade was a sharp decline in moneylending in many parts of the country. There was also a deliberate assault on the practices of rural credit.

Debt is an essential part of rural life -- farmers rely on taking out debts in order to obtain seed, food or money to hire a plough team. Before the revolution, rural moneylending had been common throughout the country. In TPLF-held areas of Tigray, the majority of farmers took out loans from traders during the famine.<sup>20</sup> While high rates of interest were charged, these loans were important in enabling them to survive.

However, in government-held areas, established sources of loans dried up. Traders were

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Baker, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 244.

<sup>19</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> 62 per cent of the sample interviewed by Gerezgerhe Bezabeh and Alex de Waal, "Evaluation of the Impact of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme, Tigray," London, ACORD, 1988, p. 19.

driven from the market, either killed or driven abroad in the early days of the revolution, or later forced out of business. Local courts and administrators refused to recognize the validity of credit agreements. The most important study of the famine in rural Wollo noted "Far more peasants would have taken out loans than actually had ... if they had more and better access to credit services."<sup>21</sup> A similar huge post-revolutionary contraction in credit was noted in Harerghe,<sup>22</sup> though in some other (non-famine stricken) parts of the country, the supply of credit was partly made up by other peasants.<sup>23</sup>

## State Farms

After the revolution, the government nationalized all the commercial farms in the country, and ran them as state farms. A fixed wage rate of 93 cents per day (equivalent to US\$0.44 or less) was paid -- well below the market rate. Unable to recruit sufficient labor at this rate, the government took to conscripting laborers either by force or with empty promises. The results were not only abuses against the human rights of the workers, but a dramatic drop in the availability of work.

The Setit-Humera mechanized farms close to the Sudan border employed between 100,000 and 300,000 seasonal laborers annually in the early 1970s, providing an essential source of income for those whose crops had failed. 16,000 laborers on the schemes fled to Sudan when the government began forcible conscription into the army from among them. Rather than hiring laborers, the government then began a program of forced labor, which was documented by the Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>24</sup>

In July 1980, the government began to recruit laborers in the towns with promises of payment of 49.50 Birr per month, plus food, medical services and accommodation. When insufficient volunteers were found, soldiers and *kebele* guards simply rounded up people from the street. 14,140 "volunteers" were taken in Addis Ababa and about 30,000 in other towns. Their belongings (even their shoes) were confiscated and they were crammed into trucks, without even the most basic facilities or stops for rest or sleeping; the trucks were so overcrowded that they had to squat for the journey of over three days. On arrival at the army

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<sup>21</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 251.

<sup>22</sup> Ashenafi Moges, 1988, p. 322.

<sup>23</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, *Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ, 1985, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Anti-Slavery Society, "Forced Labour in Humera: Intervention on Behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society," presented to the UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Working Group on Slavery, Geneva, August 1981.

camp close to Humera, the soldiers rushed onto the trucks and dragged away many women, who were raped that night, and many of whom were never seen again by their relatives or friends.

At the Humera state farm itself, no facilities or accommodation were available. Food for the workers was inadequate, and twelve hours of work was enforced each day. No wages were paid. Minor disciplinary offenses were dealt with by detention or beating; offenders were called "counter-revolutionaries." The whole camp was guarded by armed members of the "Production Task Force" who detained or shot dead those trying to escape. In prison, the cells were grossly overcrowded and torture was routine. According to the farm supervisors, 1,626 people died from starvation, disease, beatings and torture, or were shot trying to escape. Several hundred disappeared, including women abducted for sexual abuse by soldiers and officials. Many others fled to Sudan.

This program not only involved gross abuses of the rights of the forcibly recruited laborers, but removed an important source of income from poor people in Tigray, rendering them more vulnerable to famine.

Similar practices, albeit on a smaller scale, were employed to raise labor for the farms in the Awash valley. These farms had employed over 30,000 laborers, mostly from Wollo and Tigray, in the early 1970s. By the 1980s, laborers were recruited for two to three weeks unpaid labor from central Wollo, and hence no paid employment was available. Other state farms recruited labor in similar ways, with similar results.

#### *Other Restrictions on Wage Labor*

Closely related to the restriction of movement and the recruitment of labor for state farms was the restriction of wage labor on smallholdings.

Since the land reform of 1975, wage labor was technically illegal. While rarely implemented in the north, this ban provided yet another reason for officials to harass and punish individuals. In southern Ethiopia, the ban was enforced more consistently, particularly in the case of migrant labourers. In the early 1970s, more than 50,000 migrants came to Keffa every year to pick coffee. Many came from eastern Gonder (an area which suffered famine in 1984/5); some came from Wollo and Tigray. By the early 1980s, the migration had come to a complete halt.<sup>25</sup> A similar seasonal migration of laborers from Tigray to Illubabor also ceased.

Peasants were also required to do unpaid labor on the fields of PA officials and militiamen.

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<sup>25</sup> Adrian P. Wood, "The Decline of Seasonal Labour Migration to the Coffee Forests of South-West Ethiopia," *Geography*, 68, 1983, pp. 53-6.

## **Impact of the Policies: Employment**

It can safely be assumed that in a normal year, at least one million people in Tigray and north Wollo are reliant on off-farm sources of income, primarily wage labor and petty trade. A conservative estimate of the impact of the government restrictions is that the available employment was gradually cut by half between 1980 and late 1983. The result of 500,000 people -- perhaps one in twelve of the population -- being rendered unemployed in a time of poor food availability was disastrous. These people formed a large proportion of the total number of destitute migrants seeking help from REST, the RRC or voluntary agencies.

## **Impact of the Policies: The Livestock Economy**

The restrictions on trade and migration, together with the contraction of credit, meant that most rural people had essentially only one option left to obtain money for food: selling animals.

The famine of 1983-5 is remarkable in that it is the only recorded famine in north-east Africa in which animal sales outnumbered animal deaths. In all other famines, most animal owners have preferred to keep most animals in the anticipation of future recovery, obtaining their food through means other than selling them. Some animals die on account of hunger, thirst or disease, but that is a risk the owners are prepared to take -- they only sell when they are truly desperate. In 1983-5 in Tigray and Wollo the reverse was true. Almost all the animals lost were sold in order to buy food -- 79% of oxen according to one survey.<sup>26</sup> Losses due to drought alone might have amounted to 50% at most -- the much larger number sold out of desperation represents another premium paid by the poor for the military strategy of the government.

An important consequence is the enduring impoverishment of northern Ethiopia as a result of the famine.

Animals -- particularly plow oxen -- are essential to economic survival in the Ethiopian highlands. The extraordinarily high levels of animal loss in the famine -- far in excess of the losses that would have been caused by drought alone -- represent a hard blow at the very basis of the peasant economy. Six years later, animal numbers are still well below what they were before the famine, and the lack of plow oxen represents the single most severe constraint on rural production. The effects of the famine persist in increased vulnerability to famine up to today.

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<sup>26</sup> Cutler, 1988, p. 313.

## **The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission**

The RRC was a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, for the decade after its creation in 1974 it enjoyed considerable institutional strength and legitimacy, and a high degree of autonomy from other government departments. The RRC was relatively efficient at collecting, analyzing and disseminating information, and in coordinating relief programs. It compared well to similar institutions in neighboring countries. The Commissioner was able to travel abroad and meet senior diplomats and politicians from foreign countries and the UN and appeal for aid on his own behalf. At a time when all news of the famine was suppressed in the domestic Ethiopian media (June-September 1984) the RRC was still able to publish its bulletins on the developing famine.

The behavior of the RRC is a warning to those who would wish to see the Ethiopian government as wholly monolithic and dedicated solely to the single-minded destruction of internal opposition. During the years 1980-4 there was a real paradox that while several arms of the Ethiopian government were doing a great deal to create and perpetuate famine, one arm was busy trying to relieve it -- with a certain degree of success.

However, the RRC fulfilled three vital functions which fitted in extremely well with the twin government aims of suppressing insurgencies and maintaining a food supply sufficient to ensure its independence from the demands of the ordinary rural people.

One of these roles was using the destitute population of Ethiopia as the raw material for the creation of new villages, settlement schemes, state farms and collectives. The villagization carried out in Bale and Sidamo from 1979-84 is a case in point; resettlement will be considered later.

The RRC's second role was propaganda. The RRC portrayed the famine as a problem of drought and over-population, played down the existence of the war, and consistently claimed that all famine victims were being reached by it and the voluntary agencies working alongside it. This meant that the question of access to the millions of people in EPLF- and TPLF-controlled areas was never given the publicity that it warranted. The extremely needy populations in the war zones thus received far less than they required, while generous relief could be distributed in less needy government controlled areas in the center and south.

The third role played by the RRC was as a procurement agent for foreign assistance. It had only limited success up to 1984, but after 1985 it was exceptionally successful, and was repeatedly accused of underestimating needs by the donors. While much of the aid given to the RRC undoubtedly went to genuine victims of famine, much went to less worthy recipients. The militias in Eritrea and Tigray are one example (see next chapter). Another example is the

manner in which relief agencies were directed to set up distribution programs in areas of the country which were poor but by no means suffering from famine -- in some instances these were areas in which large-scale procurement by the AMC was occurring. Finally, diversion of food aid to the military and the marketplace certainly took place (see chapter 10).

### **TPLF and EPLF Social and Economic Policies**

The TPLF and EPLF both avowed radical socialist economic doctrines, but in fact followed far more pragmatic policies.

Both fronts bought grain on the open market. An attempt by the TPLF in mid 1983 to enforce controlled grain prices in Sheraro market failed when the local traders boycotted the market, and the policy was abandoned. Ironically, the TPLF came under criticism from conservative governments in Britain and the US for paying high prices for grain for relief distributions.<sup>27</sup>

TPLF taxation policy consisted of levying a "voluntary contribution" of 5 Birr.<sup>28</sup> While there are no reports of coercion, a strong element of social pressure was certainly present. Other taxes were levied on the export of grain and animals, and the import of luxury goods. The EPLF had similar policies, in addition to its more significant funds from expatriate Eritreans' donations and fundraising, and a charge on their remittances to relatives living in EPLF-controlled areas.

Both fronts moved from opposing private enterprise to promoting it. In the late 1970s, the TPLF fought against conservative political forces, including the EDU, and thus contributed to the exodus of traders from Tigray. It also set up cooperatives to compete with traders, and attempted to restrict traders' activities. These measures failed. From 1983-4 onwards, despite its increasingly hard-line Marxist ideology, the TPLF imposed no hindrances on trade and regarded merchants as "strategic allies" in the struggle. Petty trade was recognized as essential to peasant survival, and encouraged, especially after 1987. There was, however, an assumption that economic development would mean that it would ultimately cease to be profitable, so that peasants would abandon it.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1980s the EPLF revoked its earlier intentions to

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<sup>27</sup> In a letter to the head of an aid agency, dated July 11, 1989, the British Minister for Overseas Development, Chris Patten, stated his opposition to "a system which we believe is at the least giving merchants excessive profits and may well be helping to finance the TPLF."

<sup>28</sup> Gebru Tareke, "Preliminary History of Peasant Resistance in Tigray (Ethiopia)," *Africa* (Roma), 39, (1984) pp. 213-14.

<sup>29</sup> Meles Zenawi, interviewed by Alex de Waal, November 1988.

nationalize most of the Eritrean economy, which had the immediate impact of leading to measures facilitating private trade and enterprise.

Early TPLF measures also served to restrict migrant labor. Though the front never imposed any formal ban on wage labor, a number of policies discouraged it. These included the attacks on the merchant-landowner class of western Tigray, whose farms were a major source of employment, surveillance of the population to prevent infiltration of government agents and saboteurs (particularly in 1980), and the TPLF's own land reform program, which made membership in a *baito* (equivalent to a PA) a precondition for having land rights. The first two of these policies changed from 1983 onwards, so that between 1983 and 1985 the TPLF was actually assisting migration, and itself providing wage laboring opportunities in western Tigray, for example weaving baskets and tapping gum trees. Large landholdings in thinly-populated areas were also permitted.

### **The Consequences for the People**

The ultimate human cost of the famine is the number of people who suffered a premature death. Most of those who died were children under the age of five.

Those with animals had to sell; those without had two options -- to stay and starve, or move to relief shelters. The phenomenally large population living in the relief shelters in 1984/5 -- over 500,000 in Wollo alone -- was the result of this.

Relief shelters and refugee camps are notoriously unhealthy places -- one epidemiologist has written that they "constitute one of the most pathogenic environments imaginable."<sup>30</sup> Epidemics of measles, typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery and cholera swept through and decimated the camp populations. Though debilitation due to undernourishment undoubtedly played a part in the high levels of mortality that resulted, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions were at least as important. It is a rule of thumb that the death rates in a camp or shelter are about five times those prevailing in the community at large.<sup>31</sup> Some of this is due to the fact that the camp inmates are already weaker than those who remain behind in the villages, but much of it is caused directly by the degraded public health environment. There were estimated to be up to 150,000 deaths in camps during the famine<sup>32</sup> -- half or more of these

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Dick, "Diseases of Refugees -- Causes, Effects and Control," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 78, (1984) p. 736.

<sup>31</sup> Journalists commonly speak of the inhabitants of relief camps as "the lucky ones" on account of the small amounts of relief they receive. This is of course not so.

<sup>32</sup> John Seaman, "Famine Mortality in Ethiopia and Sudan," Liege, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, 1987.

deaths could have been averted had there been no need for relief camps.

The pictures of Korem and Meqele filmed by Mohamed Amin of Visnews in October 1984 were thus the direct result of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government.

In the years 1980-3, restricted access to the Tigrayan towns meant that rural people had restricted access to health services. In 1981 there was an epidemic of malaria, in 1982 there was an outbreak of meningitis, and in 1984 there were serious epidemics of measles and other diseases. These undoubtedly caused more deaths than they would have done had free access to health facilities been available. In response to this problem, REST began setting up health clinics, especially in 1981/2, but it was unable to cope with the magnitude of the health problems.

### **How Many Died?**

The total number of people killed by the famine is not known. The UN has gone on record saying that one million died, but this is no more than a guess. No systematic studies of mortality among the population in general were conducted, and the government discouraged any attempts to carry them out.<sup>33</sup> The mortality data for the 1970s famines are better than those for the 1980s. The RRC never published its own figures for deaths.

The death totals in camps can be estimated with some accuracy. 40,000 died in camps in Wollo between August 1984 and August 1985,<sup>34</sup> 15,000 in refugee camps in Sudan, and a total of between 100,000-150,000 for the whole famine zone for the whole period. (Deaths in the resettlement program will be considered in chapter 12.)

Deaths among the general population are open to greater problems of estimation -- we know neither the size of the population, the number affected by famine, the death rate in normal years, the length during which the death rate was raised on account of famine, nor the death rate during the famine. Nevertheless, some approximations can be made.

The total country-wide affected population during 1984/5, according to the RRC, was 6,098,000. In the north, there were 872,000 in Eritrea, 1,790,900 in Wollo,<sup>35</sup> 376,500 in Gonder and 200,000 in northern Shewa. The real figure for Tigray was at least one million more than the official estimate of 1,331,900; including these would give a total affected in the north of

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<sup>33</sup> A study by the Ethiopian statistician Asmerom Kidane was subject to censorship (see chapter 12) and independent attempts to do demographic surveys met with official obstruction.

<sup>34</sup> John Mitchell, "Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Administrative Region, Ethiopia," mimeo, 1986, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Later the figure for Wollo was revised upwards to over 2.5 million.



about 3.3 million. It can be assumed that death rates rose among the affected populations of Tigray and north Wollo a year before they began to rise elsewhere. In 1983/4, 1.1 million were affected in north Wollo and about two million in Tigray. This gives a total of about 6.4 million "affected person years."

The death rate in normal times in the north of Ethiopia is approximately 20 per thousand per year.

For death rates during the famine, the following fragments of data are available:

- \* An independent survey in 1987, which found that 30 per cent of sampled households had lost an average of 1.6 family members during 1984 and 1985.<sup>36</sup> Assuming an average household of five members, this implies a death rate of about 96 per thousand for the two years. This is consistent with one year of normal mortality and one year of a raised rate of 76 per thousand.
- \* An *ad hoc* Red Cross survey result, which indicates that 51 per cent of households in central Wollo lost one or more family members during the famine.<sup>37</sup> On varying assumptions, this implies a death rate of 102 or 163 per thousand for the whole famine.
- \* A survey among refugees arriving in Sudan, which indicated a death rate of 70 per thousand in the preceding year (up to and including migration).<sup>38</sup>
- \* A large-scale survey in northern Shewa in late 1985, which found death rates of 96-108 per thousand over a short period for a large population.<sup>39</sup>
- \* A compilation of data by REST in early 1985 which indicated that 1,500 people in Tigray were dying each day, implying a death rate equivalent to 110 per thousand.<sup>40</sup>
- \* A survey in resettlement sites done by a professional demographer (the only such professional survey) which found a peak death rate of about 115-123 per thousand.<sup>41</sup>

Famine mortality usually shows a seasonal variation, with the peak generally about one and a half times higher than the average for the year. The peak of about 100 per thousand implies a yearly rate of about 70 per thousand, which is consonant with the findings of surveys

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<sup>36</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, pp. 3, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p. 131.

<sup>38</sup> Cutler, 1988, p. 348.

<sup>39</sup> Dr Mack Otten of Save the Children Federation (US), quoted by Seaman, 1987.

<sup>40</sup> REST were assuming a population of Tigray and its borderlands amounting to five million.

<sup>41</sup> Asmerom Kidane, "Demographic Consequences of the Ethiopian Famine," *Demography*, 26, (1989) pp. 515-22.

covering a longer period. The excess above normal which can be attributed to famine is therefore about 50 per thousand. With 6.4 million person years "affected", this implies 320,000 deaths attributable to famine during 1983-5. Deaths in camps over and above the general famine death rate need to be added. 100,000 people died in camps, about five times the number if the people had remained in the countryside. Adding this extra 80,000, the total is 400,000.

More pessimistic estimates would expand the affected population and raise the average famine death rate, each by 25 per cent, and give the higher estimate for deaths in camps, resulting in an estimate of 590,000 famine deaths. These figures concur with the best-informed contemporary estimates, which argue for a total of about 500,000 famine deaths for the period 1982-6.<sup>42</sup>

How many of the deaths can be attributed to the counter-insurgency methods of the Ethiopian government and other punitive measures implemented to the cost of rural people? This question cannot be answered in anything but the crudest terms. The counter-insurgency strategy caused the famine to strike one year earlier than would otherwise have been the case, and forced people to migrate to relief shelters and refugee camps. The economic war against the peasants caused the famine to spread to other areas of the country. If the famine had struck only in 1984/5, and only affected the "core" areas of Tigray and north Wollo (3.1 million affected people), and caused only one quarter of the number to migrate to camps, the death toll would have been 175,000 (on the optimistic assumptions) and 273,000 (on the pessimistic assumptions). Thus between 225,000 and 317,000 deaths -- rather more than half of those caused by the famine -- can be blamed on the government's human rights violations.

In addition, deaths from famine occurred in the south -- in Harerghe, Bale, Sidamo and in Wollaita district of Shewa. These deaths almost certainly numbered in the tens of thousands. Government counter-insurgency strategies including military offensives and forced relocation<sup>43</sup> were instrumental in creating the famine in the three southern provinces, and its agricultural policy was crucial in Wollaita.

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<sup>42</sup> Cutler, 1988, p. 437.

<sup>43</sup> Described in chapter 5.