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THE AFRICAN DROUGHT AND FAMINE CRISIS

When drought and famine struck the Sahel region of Africa over a decade ago, the international community acted together to provide substantial emergency relief. And yet today, less than ten years after the height of that crisis, the world is once again called upon to help deal with an even worse recurrence of the problem—one of the most devastating famines of this century—on the African continent.

Its proportions are staggering: More than 21 African nations have been hit by critical food shortages. Over 150 million persons have been affected with at least 48 million in immediate danger of starving. Food needs have been estimated to total 7 million tons for 1985. As of April 1985 only 5.1 million of the needed 7 million tons had been pledged by donors; of the 5.1 million only 40 percent has been delivered. Nor has the donation of adequate food meant end of famine in a particular area: many African nations do not have the infrastructure needed to transport and distribute relief supplies inland.

For several reasons—some obvious, others not so obvious—the African crisis is a source of interest and concern to a broad segment of Americans. Some of the more puzzling questions that confront Americans include the following: What are the causes of the drought? How severe is the famine? What is being done in the short term? How can future recurrences be prevented? What have Americans done to help? What further roles exist for both the U.S. administration and the American people?

This ISSUE BRIEF attempts to throw some light on these questions. It discusses various causes and explores possible solutions to the famine. In the opening section we interview Jeffrey Clarke, staff member of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Hunger. □

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Jeffrey Clarke

How severe and widespread is the hunger/famine problem in Africa?

CLARKE: That is something very difficult to measure exactly; however, at the height of the famine crisis a few months ago, some 20 countries and many as 150 million people were listed as being severely affected by the drought/subsequent famine. Since that time a number of countries have moved out of that emergency categorization due to fairly effective relief programs and to the onset of rain in many areas and thus an increase local harvest. Today we’re looking at some 10, 12 countries and 30 million people who are still dramatically affected in the most negative way by the famine crisis.

What are some of its detrimental effects?

CLARKE: A famine of this magnitude disrupts the development process of a country. It leaves many people absolutely destitute for a long, long period of time. There will be negative health effects that will affect an

entire generation of children, perhaps forever. A conservative estimate is that several million people have died from the famine directly. In Ethiopia alone, 200,000 abandoned children and orphans have resulted from the famine. So the effects of this will be felt for years and years to come.

How much famine relief aid in dollar terms has the US provided to the hungry in Africa? Do you consider it as adequate?

CLARKE: During Fiscal Year 85 which just ended, the total amount of US government aid to sub-Saharan Africa for the famine/hunger problems total about \$1.2 billion. 1.2 billion that is both food/non-food emergency assistance. Of that total, about a billion dollars went directly for the purchasing and transporting of food to the food deficit countries. We then spent another 96 million dollars for emergency medical supplies, for tools, for seeds, for shelter, water wells—a whole array of activities that complemented the provision of the food itself. Now whether or not that’s adequate, that’s a very difficult thing to say. But I hope very much that the answer is yes. Now the question is will we have the political will to continue this kind of assistance now . . . as we start to look at longer term developmental issues that are going to really determine if we are going to see a reoccurrence of this famine on a frequent basis.

Do you think that the aid that’s been donated has been properly handled in terms of it getting to the people?

CLARKE: Absolutely. It has been properly handled. The food assistance that the U.S. provides is monitored step by step by US government officials. The

whole trail of the food is audited and accounted for very meticulously. . . . Of course in a program that exceeds 3 million metric tons during a year, there are going to be cases where small amounts are misused one way or another, but by and large the food provided by the U.S. goes to the intended recipient. It is in fact distributed by relief organizations, by church groups, by the United Nations, by the International Red Cross, and by governments, to the people we are sending the food to.

How has the American media covered the African hunger issues?

CLARKE: I think what is disappointing is that it took the rather dramatic BBC film of last October 1984 for this to become an issue when infact the African famine had been a major and a growing problem for two and three years before that; and then all of a sudden it was a very popular issue in the media and that of course brought about the American public response both in terms of pressure on the government and donations to the private organizations to provide the food and the medicine and the other emergency requirements. Without that media attention a lot of this would not have happened. Now the problem with the media I think has been that after they made it a major issue overnight, they then seemed to want to go to the problems and try to find some scandal involved to focus on. Now they have seemingly lost interest in the famine when in fact the need remains very, very serious and we still need their continued focus and attention on this problem.

What similarities and differences do you see between the hunger problem in Africa and that here in the U.S.?

CLARKE: Here in the U.S. we simply have too many safeguards and too many institutions to experience that kind of outright famine. But there are tens of millions of hungry people in the U.S. and they're not very visible. Recently the University Physicians Task Force did a pretty comprehensive study of the problem of hunger and malnutrition in this country. And they detected some 20 million Americans who periodically suffer from absolute shortage of food. But when the famine 'goes away' from the T.V. screens Africa will still have tens of millions of hungry Africans and in America we're going to have up to 20 million hungry Americans who deserve and who need some assistance to help themselves. Thus there is in fact a great similarity. □

COPING WITH DROUGHT AND PREVENTING FAMINE: BASIC ISSUES

Throughout history the spectre of famine and starvation has approached mythical proportions. Today, when advances in science and technology have made the miraculous commonplace, we are still humbled by our inability to provide for the hungry of the world. As we grapple with the current crisis, we may have at last begun to confront some of the more basic questions. Certainly, we are now constrained to accept some of the more demanding answers.

Famine: Who is to Blame?

Famine is an occurrence that has many causes and complicating factors. During the current crisis commentators and analysts continually spoke of the failure of Africa and of the mismanagement and corruption that is perceived to be unique to their governments. Those who were more charitable also cited the environmental and ecological basis of drought and famine. No less vilified were colonialism and imperialism; one the specter of past evil and the other a successor to that evil, yet stronger and much more pervasive. Clearly none of these leads directly to famine; in the worst of times, rural farmers have fed themselves and provided for their families while weathering periodic drought and disaster. Colonialism and imperialism though debilitating and cruel depend on order and stability and as such have a stake in averting natural disasters such as famine. Taken separately these actors, or factors, cannot be blamed for the dilemma of recurrent food shortages nor can they be tasked with providing the ultimate solutions.

Playing for Time

Special relief concerts and recordings featuring American, European, Hispanic and Caribbean artists have helped to supply emergency aid to Africa's starving millions. Yet where relief campaigns served to raise public consciousness and immediate funds, the limits to these efforts must be realized. Much of the appeal and media coverage highlights and reinforces the charity syndrome that surrounds such events. There remains a danger that long term emergency aid, and food aid in general, will be regarded as a handout in the public mind. Where this attitude is allowed to take hold in the donor community, an accompanying idea will also develop that discourages further giving for fear that it will undermine the recipients will to produce for themselves. It is therefore the duty of relief workers and volunteers to be concerned with how the appeal is structured and how people may react to it. To their credit, U.S.A. for Africa, the American artist's relief effort has sought to address the range of problems that causes famine.

What Next After the Appeal?

It is critically important that the sentiment behind relief efforts like U.S.A. for Africa and Live Aid are not distorted or lost, but reinterpreted to address important political issues as well. The natural concern of humanitarianism must be the development of a just order for the world. Therefore, Americans in particular must seek changes in policies that mediate against the attainment of food security in developing African nations.

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Private aid must demand and utilize responsible state participation, particularly in those instances where warfare, terrain barriers or intercountry conflict may present problems. Private relief should always be viewed as only one of many responses to disasters such as famine. The nations of the world must not be allowed to abrogate their responsibilities to the suffering because of internecine political conflict. The world itself must be prepared for a long term confrontation with the current food shortage.

The U.S.: Responsibility and Failure

Finally, a further effort must be made to become familiar with the greater issues concerning food as a political weapon and famine as a consequence of being powerless. Americans must question why it is we knew so little so late about a tragedy whose proportions dwarfs that of other disasters of the twentieth century. Given the technological capabilities of the west and the U.S. in particular, why wasn't there an earlier warning of this impending crisis? Even though the Global Information and Early Warning System indicated an approaching crisis as early as 1983, appropriate steps were not instituted to avert the famine. It has also been suggested that, had profiles been constructed using data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's surveys, the present circumstances might have been predicted and planned for. The failure of the West to have coordinated the use of this data is both shocking and inexcusable.

Belatedly, in July 1985, the U.S. announced the development of a Famine Early Warning system that will provide monthly reports on conditions affecting Africa's and the world's food supply. Utilizing computer technology and orbiting satellites, this system will augment the Food Agriculture Organization's existing early warning system.

New Perspectives Needed

The greatest need at this time is to adopt a different perspective in the search for answers. This perspective must challenge the hegemony and patronizing nature of most development thought. This approach does not imply that the issues and concerns are changing, but that our way of looking at them will be altered. In the era of post-colonialism, the continuing struggle has been called the revolution of rising expectations. It is with this in mind that the problems of food production and development must be approached. In Africa, the greatest numbers and the greatest expectations are those of rural peasants and farmers. It is from this perspective that we must view the aims of development, or liberation. All too often the pursuit of development goals has meant that the exploitation of the food producers, the small farmers, has followed close behind.

The question of gender and how development policy has paid little attention to the plight of women must also become a central issue. In many societies in Africa the primary producers have traditionally been women. Yet the policies and practices of governments, donors and institutions have ignored and helped to undermine their roles. In changing African societies they have been hampered by the age-old traditions that limit the participation of women in policy making yet still call upon them to do

tasks that are central to the survival of the group. Health, educational and nutritional assistance for women carries a low priority in many countries. The immediate, meaningful integration of women into the deliberation on agricultural policy is a pre-condition for the achievement of the goal of self-sufficiency.

The Politics of Starvation

The imperative for the development of food security also implies as strong an imperative for the defense of national integrity: a nation should not have to face political or economic peonage in order to qualify for assistance in becoming self sufficient in food production. Seizing upon the vulnerability of famine stricken nations, some in donor countries have used the occasion of the emergency to score political points, lambasting the economic policies of stricken nations, and extolling the virtues of the "free market." This is a facile argument and to use it to coerce or browbeat developing African nations into emulating the West is chauvinism in its most odious form.

As the World Bank and the IMF force captive governments to accept suicidal conditions that translate into pushing food even further beyond the reach those already starving, it ought to be clear that these international bureaucracies play a central role in the political economy of starvation in Africa. Unfortunately, when countries like the U.S. continue calling the tune, and when the multilateral institutions join in the chorus, there are few nations who can afford not to dance. In essence the colonial roots of today's dependency are alive in the policies and practices of the major sources of development resources.

Planning for Change

Are African nations then hostage to these conditions? Can they hope to break the cycle that leads to famine and suffering? Is it feasible to continue to be as concerned with the process of change as with its ultimate result? In an essay that equated development with liberation, Denis Goulet asserted that while visible benefits are no doubt sought, the decisive test of successful development lies in fashioning a society which fosters certain intangibles: greater popular autonomy in a non-elitist manner; social creativity instead of imitation; and control over forces of change instead of mere adjustments to them. Today, almost a generation after a new Africa began to emerge from the chains of colonialism, the search for a development strategy that liberates as well as transforms continues. It is clear that neither the idealism of African leaders nor the largesse of Western nations alone are sufficient sources of solutions. It is however, clear that when these resources are combined and rationalized with the needs of rural food producers, they become a formidable force for progressive change.

Africa is beginning its second hundred years since the Berlin Conference. The significance of this historical juncture is that in the hundred years since 1885, the power relationships between the nations have changed little. Africa has enormous potential which it has attempted to explore. The present famine and suffering constitutes another temporary detour in the journey toward liberation, empowerment, and prosperity. □

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A Quarterly Journal of Opinion on Africa and the Caribbean

TRANSAFRICA FORUM is a quarterly journal of opinion on matters pertaining to Africa and the Caribbean. The journal presents an independent review of differing perspectives on political, economic and cultural issues affecting black communities globally. The intent of the journal is to provide an expanded analytical framework which can be useful to a broad audience with a continuing commitment to African and Caribbean advancement.

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