FAMINE RELIEF IN ETHIOPIA: AN UPDATE

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Select Committee on Hunger for this opportunity to testify on the famine situation in Ethiopia and the status of the ongoing international relief effort. For the information of the Committee, I have worked in the region for most of the last ten years. My work has included five years as a journalist, covering military, political and economic developments in the region for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Associated Press, Boston Globe, Miami Herald, Toronto Globe and Mail, Observer (London) and others, and another five years as a consultant to various relief and development agencies working in the region, among them Lutheran World Relief, Dutch Interchurch Aid, Euro Action ACOORD and the Emergency Relief Desk. My work with the Emergency Relief Desk and its partner organization, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), included undertaking the first internal purchase operation in 1983. I am presently the Coordinator of the Africa Development Project for The Development Group for Alternative Policies in Washington, DC.

I will confine my comments to the situation in the regions of Eritrea and Tigray, as I am most familiar with these. Since 1980, I have made over ten visits to these two areas, most recently in February of this year.

The Scope of the Current Crisis

The situation in Ethiopia today is quite precarious. Famine has once again descended upon the landscape with grave consequences for the country's farmers, particularly those in the northern region of Tigray and in Eritrea. Significantly, these areas are affected by long-running wars which have consistently removed able-bodied producers from the agricultural sector, disrupted local transportation and marketing systems, displaced producers and wreaked havoc on already marginal lands. In addition, the fact that rehabilitation assistance did not materialize following the 1984-85 crisis has meant that a majority of peasant producers in the region have been unable to produce even a limited surplus while a significant number have been unable to regain their self-sufficiency in food production.

As a result of these factors, the rural populations of Eritrea and Tigray were left economically vulnerable to the localized drought of the last two years. Crop failure has been estimated at 100 percent in parts of Eritrea, and ranged from 15 to 90 percent in Tigray during this season. The situation in Wollo is also thought to be critical, although the lack of regular on-site information from this province makes precise assessments difficult.

According to the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), indigenous organizations working in Eritrea and Tigray, respectively, the number of persons in need of assistance in Eritrea is 1.5 million, while the figure for Tigray stands at 1.2 million. The figure for Eritrea was revised upwards by 200,000 when the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) captured the port of Massawa and surrounding villages in February. Of the 1.2 million figure for Tigray, REST assumes responsibility for 1.0 million and the Joint Relief Partnership (JRP) program is attempting to meet the needs of the remaining 200,000.

In Eritrea, the famine crisis is exacerbated by continued fighting in the environs of Massawa and Asmara along the highway connecting the two towns. In both Eritrea and Tigray, aerial bombardment is causing further loss of life, property damage and displacement, and is forcing cross-border relief convoys to restrict movement to nighttime hours only. The bombing of the port of Massawa has been particularly brutal and destructive, with attacks by the government air force occurring on an almost daily basis. Civilian targets have been hit repeatedly. The EPLF also claims that the Ethiopian air force has used napalm bombs in attacks on Massawa; while I cannot comment on this particular claim, I can state that I have witnessed the use of napalm by the Ethiopian air force on previous occasions.

Forecast for the Coming Months

Many in the relief community, as well as the majority of observers, continue to operate on the basis of the faulty assumption that over three million people in Eritrea and Tigray will drop dead if emergency assistance is not immediately forthcoming. It is true that what we are trying to do is to prevent starvation. Starvation, however, takes time, and is an immediate threat to only a portion of the total population in need.
Most of those counted as in need lost their last harvest. At this juncture, we are trying to prevent the affected population from having to employ 'last resort' coping mechanisms — particularly, the sale of livestock and tools, the consumption of seeds or, at worst, migration away from productive land. If we are not successful, the possibility of starvation increases enormously, as each of these steps reduces the ability of the farmer to produce in the future. Comparisons to the crisis of 1984-85 are appropriate, but it may be some months before we witness starvation on that scale.

It is also important that we prevent, as far as possible, the migration of farmers from their lands. During the 1984-85 emergency more than 500,000 producers in Eritrea and Tigray abandoned their farms as a direct result of the famine. The majority fled to Sudan where relief assistance was more readily available. Tigray has recorded a higher incidence of migration in recent years, and while much of it is seasonal wage-labor migration, REST reported last fall that 50,000 farmers had moved from the east and south-central regions of Tigray towards the west because of famine conditions. In February of this year farmers were given the option of migrating to the west, where a grain surplus is available, before the rainy season. According to reports from the field, some movement has already taken place.

Two factors will affect the plight of the civilian population in need during the coming months. The onset of the rainy season in late May or early June will cause a decrease in the volume of assistance transported into Eritrea and Tigray. It is therefore important that as much assistance as possible be made available now. An additional problem will be posed by the spread of measles and meningitis. Measles was the primary cause of death for as many as 60 percent of the children who died during the last famine; meningitis occurs in epidemic proportions each year during this time. In order to decrease the death rate among a highly vulnerable population, donors should be considering the provision of vaccinations and attendant supplies as soon as possible.

The cross-border operations

The most effective channels available to the international community at this point in time are the cross border programs mounted from eastern Sudan into Eritrea and Tigray. Operational for over a decade, these programs have received the tacit support of successive Sudanese governments interested in inhibiting the flow of refugees into already crowded camps dotting the Sudanese-Ethiopian border. Cross border efforts are supported by a number of NGO networks including the Emergency Relief Desk, the CAFOC network, the Oxfam, the Oxfams, the Eritrea Inter-Agency Consortium and the

Tigray Transport and Agriculture Consortium, as well as by individual NGOs. Several NGO donors channel government and/or EEC funding to the cross border programs.

These programs have proven to be extremely effective. Considerable local expertise in disaster management has been gained over the years and affected communities are actively involved in relief assessments and aid programs. Both ERA and REST, which operate as the sole implementors of relief programs in their respective areas, allow full donor access to their operations and regularly invite donors to monitor relief and development programs given the present military situation, which finds the Ethiopian government restricted to major towns in Eritrea and with no presence in Tigray, the cross border programs also provide the most efficient means for reaching needy populations.

While the ERA and REST programs are similar in their juxtaposition to operations mounted from the Ethiopian government side, however, it is important to note that they are distinct from one another. It should also be taken into account that their capacities, structures and programmatic priorities are different.

The internal purchase program

In early 1983 it became clear to REST and its donors that food aid in quantities sufficient to meet the relief needs at that time could not be moved into Tigray before the onset of the rainy season. REST requested that donors consider providing cash funds for the purchase of surplus grain available in Wolkeit, a fertile and thinly populated region of western Tigray. With an initial grant of US$ 100,000, the REST Internal Purchase Program was launched.

With western and other areas of Tigray producing an annual surplus even in times of famine, the Internal Purchase Program has been effective since it began. According to an independent crop assessment conducted by Oxfam UK, the amount of surplus grain purchased inside Tigray is approximately the same as imported grain.) Donors have been able to monitor the program to their satisfaction.

The internal purchase program is effective for a number of reasons. It provides for a quick response and is competitive in terms of cost. (Many donors have registered concern at the relatively high cost per ton of grain inside Tigray. However, when the cost of shipment and local transport are taken into account, the amount of surplus grain purchased inside Tigray is approximately the same price per ton as imported grain.)
Donor response to cross-border needs

ERA and REST have each outlined bulk food needs in excess of 320,000 metric tons. Should this aid be provided, farmers will be able to remain on their land and cultivate for the upcoming season. Conversely, a shortfall will mean a certain decrease in future production and an increase in the death rate, and will also cause farmers to sell off their tools and livestock, eat their seeds and, possibly, migrate. At present, ERA reports that just over 90,000 metric tons have been pledged or received; REST has received or been promised just under 90,000 metric tons and funding for an additional 40,000 metric tons purchased internally.

Recent months have seen a dramatic improvement in both the timing and scale of the donor response to cross border needs. However, less than 30 percent of the food needs are being met in these areas. Most observers agree that it is already too late to avert a major crisis from unfolding during the coming months. Meanwhile, little is being provided in the way of storage facilities, emergency medical supplies or the administrative assistance needed to facilitate communications and program implementation. The international response to requests for transport assistance has been particularly weak.

The need for transport assistance

It is imperative that food aid provided to ERA or REST be accompanied by transport assistance as the availability of transportation is the primary determinant of the capacity of these organizations. It should also be noted that the trucking fleets operated by these organizations serve relief needs but are also called upon to service development programs and to move the tools and seeds needed for rehabilitation efforts.

ERA’s current truck fleet stands at 341, including 53 trucks that were scheduled to arrive in March-April of this year. The Eritrea Inter-Agency Consortium, a body of 12 donor agencies supporting ERA programs, recently commissioned a transport study which recommended that ERA’s entire truck fleet should be replaced by 1993 and that, in light of the present emergency, 125 additional trucks should be ordered immediately.

REST’s transport fleet currently includes 200 trucks running from the Sudanese border to depots inside Tigray and an additional 130 trucks working the routes from depots to distribution points within Tigray. A new contract has been signed for the hiring of an additional 150 commercial trucks, bringing to 250 the total number of commercial vehicles being utilized. Eighty of the 494 trucks requested in the proposal developed and circulated by the Tigray Transport and Agriculture Consortium have been pledged, leaving outstanding need at over 400 vehicles.

In both Eritrea and Tigray, transport is likely to be the factor most critical to the extent and effectiveness of the relief operation during the coming months. However, many donor governments appear hesitant to provide trucks for these relief operations. With the exception of a few major relief agencies, governments are the only donors with sufficient funds to provide trucks for the cross border operations in the quantities required. Concerns that these trucks might be used for other than relief purposes can and should be allayed through consultation with other donors who have provided trucks and through discussion with ERA and REST.

Other channels for assistance

Government channels are at present limited. As mentioned previously, the government has since February 1988 had no physical presence in Tigray. In Eritrea, the government has put forward a proposal for massive airlifts to the capital at Asmara and other cities which has as yet met with a poor response from the donor community. Airlifting food is far more costly and inefficient than would be accessing Asmara from the port of Massawa. Areas south of the contested zone comprising Wollo and Gonder are served from the port of Massawa.

In March of this year the first of several convoys operating under the banner of the Joint Relief Partnership moved north from Dessie towards Tigray. This establishment of the ‘southern corridor operation’ represented an important step forward in attempts to achieve a safe passage agreement for the free distribution of relief supplies in contested areas. Under the arrangement, negotiated independently between the JRP and the Ethiopian government’s RRC and the JRP and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), food is moved from a government into a guerrilla held area under the auspices of the Catholic Church. The operation has run into some logistical difficulties in meeting its 14,500 metric ton per month goal, however.

While the JRP initiative has set an important precedent in the region, it must be noted that the program is both limited in scale and fragile in nature. Its success depends upon the willingness of both the Ethiopian government and the TPLF to allow its operation. The effectiveness of the initiative is also tied to the use of Assab, which is now the sole port of entry for all goods imported by Ethiopia including fertilizers, which are brought into the country in large quantities this time of year. Meanwhile, the joint forces of the TPLF and EPDM have recently voiced their concern that the operation has not expanded, stating in an April 30th statement that “the church organizations...
involved have very limited resources and have, for reasons we
cannot understand, prevented other NGOs with resources from fully
participating in the operations."

**A longer term view**

Of critical importance at this time is also the provision of
rehabilitation assistance. While I am greatly encouraged by the
rapid response of the U.S. Agency for International Development
to this crisis and commend the U.S. Congress for its vigilance
on this matter, I remain concerned that the focus is solely on
emergency needs. In addition to helping people to survive during
this period of acute shortage we must also work to ensure that
they are able to cultivate during the coming seasons. In many
cases, this requires assistance in the form of seeds, tools or
livestock.

Rehabilitation assistance seems to evoke the same hesitant
response as transport assistance; it would appear that in this
highly-charged political situation donor governments place
rehabilitation (and transport) assistance in the 'development' or
'political' category while relief aid remains a more neutral
proposition. I would argue that time does not afford us the
luxury of this debate. Providing food for hungry farmers without
the trucks needed to deliver it is surely folly; providing food
to keep farmers alive without helping them to provide for
themselves is cynical. Research conducted by REST in the mid-
1980s revealed that 67 percent of the farmers recording reduced
harvests during the 1983-84 season had lost their livestock the
previous year. The shortfall in rehabilitation assistance
following the 1984-85 famine crisis was clearly a factor in the
current crisis. It can be concluded that by failing to provide
adequate rehabilitation assistance now we are paving the way for
renewed famine.

**Access to the port of Massawa**

The utilization of the port of Massawa is obviously critical
to the success of the current relief effort. However, it is
important to accurately assess the effect that the capture of the
port by the EPLF has had on the relief effort. Civilians living
in guerrilla-held areas -- in fact, the majority of civilians in
Eritrea and Tigray -- did not receive any food delivered through
the port of Massawa before it changed hands; these people were
accessed through Port Sudan to the cross-border network.

If the port were re-opened today, it would be possible to
use it to serve the needs of these civilians and those remaining
in government-held areas. In the weeks immediately following its
capture of the port, the EPLF made clear to the international

community its willingness to allow the use of the port for relief
activities and to permit the United Nations to coordinate such
activities. Late last month, the leadership of the EPLF again
conveyed to the UN Secretary General its willingness to allow the
full use of Massawa for relief activities designed to meet the
needs of civilians in all parts of Eritrea and in Ethiopia.
Specifically, the EPLF recommended: that the Asmara-Massawa road
be open to relief convoys on certain days of the week and during
specified hours; that a truck be agreed upon in the vicinity of
Ghinda; and that the UN supervise the implementation of these and
other arrangements. To date, the EPLF has not received a
response from the United Nations.

The obstacle to re-opening the port of Massawa is the
Ethiopian government, which contains to subject port facilities
and the civilian population residing in the area to devastating
air attacks and has stated its intention to re-capture the port
at any cost. In a press statement released April 26th in
response to the "Principles for Humanitarian Relief Efforts in
Ethiopia" set forth by major donors, the Ethiopian government
made clear that with respect to the relief effort it will go only
so far as to increase the volume of aid moved through the
southern corridor and allow airlifts to government-controlled
towns. Government refusal to allow the UN to coordinate relief
activities in Massawa is couched in a defense of the unity and
territorial integrity of the country.

That the Ethiopian government should continue to employ
national sovereignty as the justification for denying food to
people it claims as its citizens is clearly unacceptable. As
such, House Resolution 384, which specifically calls upon the
President of the United States to oppose any favorable treatment
of Ethiopia by the World Bank or IMF until such
time as it accepts that specific principles should govern the
relief effort, is to be commended. For the last several years,
warring parties in the Horn of Africa have denied food to
civilian populations and manipulated suffering to political ends.
Often vocal in its condemnation, the international community has
done little to fundamentally challenge this tendency.

While all efforts must be made to re-open the port of
Massawa, however, it must be recognized that waiting for Mengistu
to change his mind without bringing the cross-border operations
up to full capacity will spell death for thousands of people. As
such, assistance to the cross-border programs of EKA and REST
must be immediately increased and sustained. Diplomatic efforts
to convince the Ethiopian government to allow the use of Massawa
should be pursued simultaneously. At the same time, efforts
should be made to ensure that the 310,000 metric tons of supplies
designated for arrival in Massawa at the time of its capture by
the EPLF are or have been re-consigned to Port Sudan.
Recommendations

In general, I would strongly recommend that the Committee seek to encourage the United States government to move quickly in its response to the urgent humanitarian needs of the people of the region but also to provide emergency assistance in the context of a broader policy designed to promote equity and support conflict resolution in the region. Specifically, the Select Committee on Hunger and the United States government should:

1. Explore further the implementation of the donor principles outlined in the "Statement of Principles for Humanitarian Relief Efforts in Ethiopia." It should be noted that both the EPLF and TPLF have recently stated in writing their desire to see the UN play a coordinating role and their willingness to observe some sort of safe passage agreement. These organizations should be held accountable to their statements. So long as the Ethiopian government remains the primary obstacle to achieving agreement on the proposed principles, increased pressure must be brought to bear on the Mengistu regime.

2. Expand and sustain assistance to the cross border operations in a comprehensive fashion. In particular, support to the cross border programs should include not only food but also the provision of trucks, spare parts, fuel, storage, medical and other emergency relief supplies and administrative costs.

3. Ensure that relief items originally consigned to the port of Massawa for delivery after 8 February 1990 have been or will be re-consigned to the Port Sudan.

4. Ensure the stability and, where possible, expansion of the JRP-sponsored 'southern corridor' initiative. It is important, however, that the JRP channel be seen as a complement rather than alternative to the cross border operation.

5. Undertake to provide basic rehabilitation assistance, in particular seeds, tools and replacement livestock as necessary.

In the final analysis, famine in Ethiopia can only be thwarted when its people achieve a just and lasting peace. It is thus hoped that the U.S. Congress and Administration will explore and support conflict resolution measures in the region with a vigor equal to that which has characterized their response to recurrent famine.

Thank you.

Ethiopia

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Overview:

The regime of Lt. Col. Mengistu, who took power from long-time Emperor Haile Selassie in a 1974 coup and set up a Communist dictatorship, appeared increasingly embattled in 1989 as his forces suffered embarrassing defeats by the Marxist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which has been fighting a separatist war in Eritrea province since 1961, and by the Marxist Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has fought for Mengistu's removal since 1977. Before the regime and EPLF agreed on a cease-fire perhaps 40,000 government troops were killed, wounded or captured by the Tigrean rebels in 1989, and the army's best trained unit, the 102nd Airborne Division, was defeated in an TPLF offensive at Welo, Tigre province in January. The rebels now have the 60,000 troops they need to stem the Tigrean army's access to the Red Sea. In November 1989 Mengistu began to engage in peace talks with the Tigrean rebels for the first time ever—which is regarded as a sign of his desperation. At the same time, he called for a national mobilization. Reports indicate that urban neighborhood groups have been ordered to produce six tons of food per person a month for the war effort, and government officials have been underwriting special weapons training.

In May a coup attempt launched by key military figures wanting a negotiated end to the northern war was snuffed out. According to one of the coup's planners, 600 officers were arrested or executed since the attempt. This depletion of the officer corps has severely weakened the army and the war effort. Replacements are poorly trained, and the regime forcibly recruited to guard Addis Ababa are scared and tired of fighting.