Gayle Smith coordinates the Africa program for the Washington-based Development Group for Alternative Policies. In the past 10 years she has worked extensively in the Horn of Africa on relief and development issues. Her most recent trip to Ethiopia and Sudan was in June 1990. Joe Stork spoke with her in Washington.

Compared to the famine of 1984-85, what is the scope of the problem in the Horn today?

In terms of numbers, the famine is somewhat less severe than it was five years ago; there are an estimated 5 million in need as opposed to 7-9 million in 1984-85. Just over 1 million of these people are in Eritrea; another 2.2 million live in Tigray. The rest live elsewhere in the north of Ethiopia, areas now also affected by the war.

A significant difference is that the last famine was the result of a generation of war and five successive years of drought. This time around, the war is more of a factor. There has been only one year of drought. The main cause of the present famine is that the productive capacity of the farming population has been gradually eroded over the years, leaving them very vulnerable to a single year of drought.

The aid situation has improved this time as well. Far more aid is being provided directly to the populations in need, the majority of whom are in rural areas administered by the opposition. Last time, the bulk of the aid went to the towns.

In 1984-85, did the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) play the same role that they play today?

Both organizations have gained enormous experience in disaster management, and both are serving larger populations today than in days past.

Even though probably 75 percent of people in need in 1984-85 lived in the guerrilla-held areas of Eritrea and Tigray, approximately 90 percent of all international assistance was channeled to Ethiopian government-controlled areas, reducing REST and ERA to minor players. Today these organizations are playing the major role in their respective areas, meeting about half the needs there. In Tigray, where there has been no government presence for over a year, REST is the single agency offering on-the-ground assistance.

One reason aid patterns have changed is because donors recognized the importance of assisting people in their villages. Otherwise, they migrate and can't produce. The major factor has been the very public defeat of the Ethiopian army, and a grudging recognition that REST and ERA are the only bodies with access to the majority of those in need.

Is relief coming into Eritrea and Tigray mainly through Sudan?

Yes, and there is the "southern corridor" operation, through which the Ethiopian churches move from the government-held port of Assab into areas of the north held by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

What is the food situation like in the rest of Ethiopia?

In the areas south of Addis Ababa, it is thought to be relatively good. North of the capital the situation is tenuous, because the conflict has moved from Tigray into Wollo, Gondar and Shoa provinces. The worst-affected areas are still in Tigray and Eritrea, where the combined impact of drought and war has been most severe. But throughout central and northern Ethiopia, the food situation has been affected by the distortion of the trade environment. No goods are coming in through the port of Massawa, captured by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in February, and the port of Assab has been entirely given over to military and relief imports. Normal exchange between the towns and the countryside has been disrupted by the shortfall in rural production and the isolation of the towns that remain in government hands. Asmara, for example, is tightly surrounded and the Ethiopian army has prevented merchants or other civilians from moving in or out. A city of 400,000 civilians and 100,000 soldiers is being supplied by air.
Is there any internal surplus being sold or distributed?

In parts of Tigray, Wollo and Gondar there are rich agricultural reserve areas that produce a surplus even in times of drought. Some of this grain is being purchased and then distributed by REST in deficit areas. In Eritrea, there is no surplus available.

How do the politics of REST and ERA affect their relief efforts?

They both work from the ground up and involve the population in the actual relief operation. In Tigray, the relief effort is entirely locally managed. Groups of villages are given a quota based on an assessment done by REST and local village committees and on the amount of food coming in. They then develop their own list of beneficiaries, which is evaluated and modified in community meetings. REST itself is very much in the background. Government relief operations tend, by contrast, to be much more top-down in style.

You said about half the needs are being met. What about the half that are not being met?

"In need" means those people who are faced with a shortfall in their harvest. They need food or they will be forced to sell their productive assets—draft oxen and tools—and eventually migrate. Meeting only half the need means economic capacity is gradually being chipped away—the seeds are being sown for another famine in the future, because most of these people are subsistence-level producers. There are pockets of starvation, but mass starvation comes when people have sold all of their assets, left their land and can find no other alternative. We aren’t at that point yet, but we’re certainly on the way. The 1990 summer rains will be a decisive factor, as will aid levels, because aid allows people to keep producing food.

To what extent did the famine in 1984-85 lay the groundwork for the present crisis?

The majority of farmers in these areas have not yet recovered from the last crisis. They are extremely vulnerable to any disruption in the agricultural cycle.

In addition, the last famine provoked mass migration. It takes years to recover from this. To resume a subsistence existence farmers must earn enough capital to buy back tools and draft animals. One of the tragedies of
the last famine was that efforts to re-
habilitate famine victims—that is, pro-
vide them with seeds, tools and oxen—
met with very disappointing results.

What else can you say about the
extent of the displacement and mi-
gration in 1984-85?
In the case of Tigray, I'd say about
210,000 came out village by village.
About 180,000 of these people repatri-
ated in the same way. The Eritrean
migration, on the other hand, was more
spontaneous. Of about a quarter of a
million Eritreans who came to Sudan in
a period of less than six months, a
couple hundred thousand may have re-
puated. Many went back to where
they had come from. Many, however,
are still in camps in the west of Eritrea
because of the fighting.

What did the Ethiopian gov-
ernment resettlement program in-
volve?
It moved people out of northern areas
such as Tigray and Wollo, and into the
south. The program received much cri-
icism, not because people challenged
the premise that a lot of the land was
depleted, but because people argued
that they should be resettled to areas
that were culturally similar. The poli-
tics were also questionable, because
many were moved from opposition ar-
eas into government-held areas. Most
were moved 600-700 miles from Tigray
and Wollo to southern areas where
there was another people, another lan-
guage, a different climate and a differ-
ent agricultural cycle. Little prepara-
tion was made for their arrival.

Are those people still there, or
have they migrated back?
Many fled to south-central Sudan, were
then trucked back up north and eventu-
ally walked back to their villages—a
journey of about 2500 kilometers. Many
are still in resettlement camps in the
south of Ethiopia.

Where is aid today primarily com-
ing from?
As it was in 1984-85, the United States,
the EEC and Australian and European
governments are also major donors. Pri-
ivate NGOs like the Oxfam network and
the churches are also large donors.

How is the political situation in
Sudan affecting the whole situation?
Successive Sudanese governments have
allowed the cross-border operation to
continue because they can't afford more
refugees in eastern Sudan.

Can you say anything about the
relationship between the donor
agencies, the NGOs, and the politi-
cal movements?
Most of the NGOs that support pro-
grams in Eritrea and Tigray have been
working in the region for a long time
and are well-established. ERA and
REST have established themselves
from the outset as the implementing
agencies, so the donors remain donors
and don't run their own independent
operations. This tends to result in a
slightly more equal relationship than is
usually the case in a relief situation
where the donor and the beneficiary are
really at opposite ends. Generally, do-
ners are impressed with the efficiency
and effectiveness of the ERA and
REST operations as well.

What is the major obstacle today in
the relief effort?
It's the incapacity of the international
aid system to cope with internal con-
flicts. The aid system, which is domi-
nated by the United Nations and donor
governments, has a structural bias to-
wards governments. Most of today's
conflicts are internal as opposed to
state-to-state. This results in a pro-
grammatic bias towards civilians living
in government-held areas. Because
most of the information obtained by the
UN and the governments involved
comes from "official" government
sources, this often means that the anal-
ysis of the problem is distorted as well.

The second consequence is that the
style and content of aid programs ref-
lect a governmental as opposed to a
grassroots bias. This is starting to
change, albeit very slowly, in the field of
development because local organiza-
tions are challenging the effectiveness
of the prevailing system. Relief, how-
ever, is still very much dominated by
the notion that those in need are help-
less and cannot take decisions for them-
selves. Meanwhile, neither the UN nor
a donor government can organize or run
the kinds of operations put together by
REST and ERA, as these can only be
forged by the people themselves. Unfor-
nately, these local efforts are obscured
in the current international system.

Do the Soviets have much leverage
over the Ethiopian government?
The Soviets have distanced themselves
from Mengistu, and have clearly pres-
sured him to accept certain compro-
mises in the negotiations process and
relief effort. However, the Soviets have
pledged to fulfill their outstanding arms
commitments to Addis Ababa. Soviet
arms are still being delivered to the port
of Assab at a significant rate.

And what leverage does the United
States have?
The United States is and always will be
the major food donor, and it will surely
be one of the major providers of eco-

nomics when the wars are
over. In addition to economic leverage,
the United States also has considerable
leverage in the area of negotiations and
settlement. The weight of the US be-
hind a referendum in Eritrea, for exam-
ple, would likely bring about its imple-
mentation; conversely, Washington's
current position in favor of an Eritrean
settlement within the context of a uni-
fied Ethiopia works against the referen-
dum proposal.