

The Famine This Time

Gayle Smith

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.

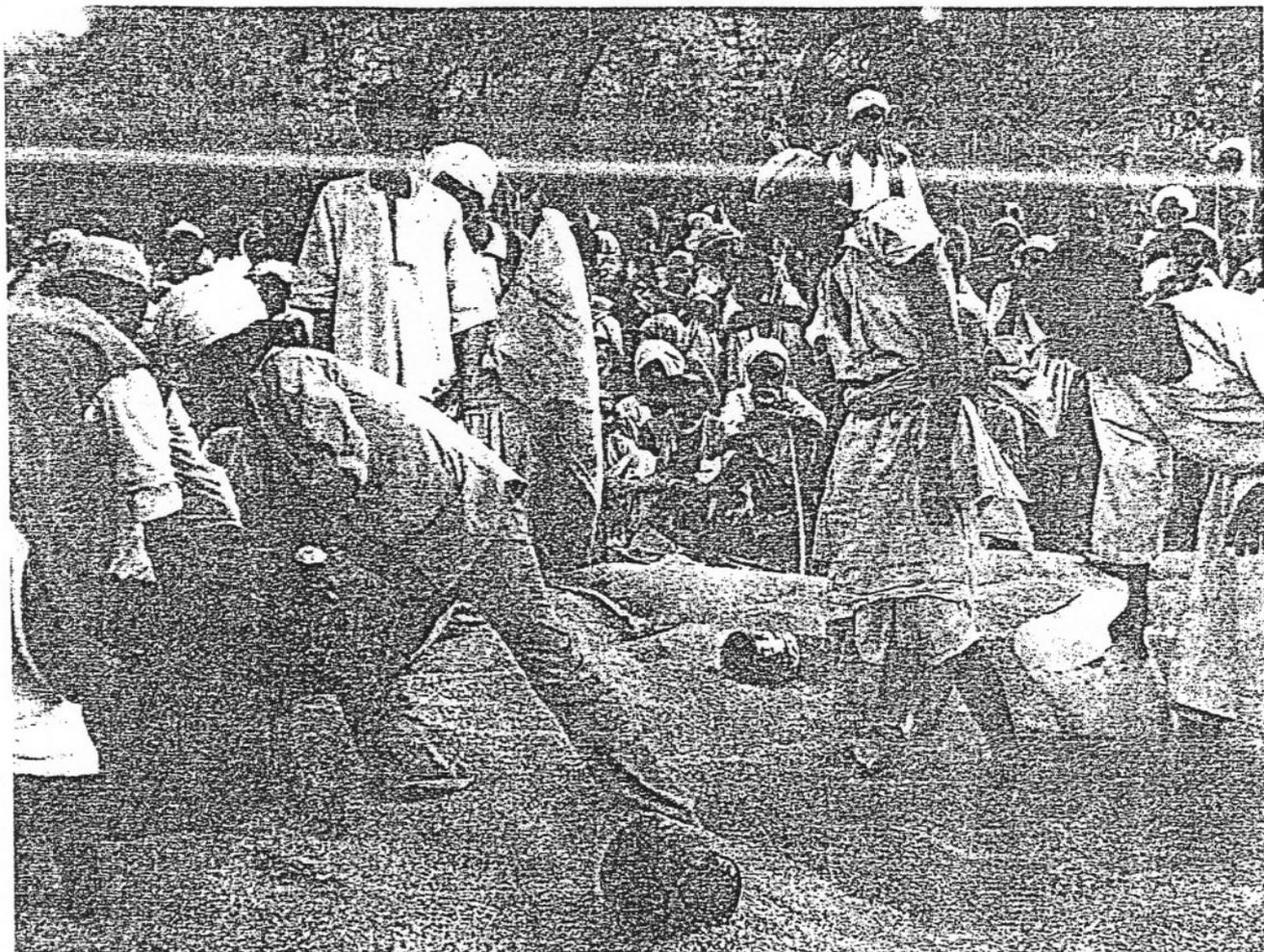
One reason aid patterns have changed is because donors recognized the importance of assisting people in their villages. Otherwise, they migrate and can't produce. The major factor has been the very public defeat of the Ethiopian army, and a grudging recognition that REST and ERA are the only bodies with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



Food distribution by the Eritrean Relief Association.

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 rehabilitate famine victims—that is, provide them with seeds, tools and oxen—met with very disappointing results.

What else can you say about the extent of the displacement and migration 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 repatriated 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 repatriated. 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 government resettlement program involve?

It moved people out of northern areas such as Tigray and Wollo, and into the south. The program received much criticism, 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 politics were also questionable, because many were moved from opposition areas into government-held areas. Most were moved 600-700 miles from Tigray and Wollo to southern areas where there was another people, another language, a different climate and a different agricultural cycle. Little preparation 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 eventually 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 coming from?

As it was in 1984-85, the United States, at this point, is the primary donor, but

the EEC and Australian and European governments are also major donors. Private 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 political movements?

Most of the NGOs that support programs 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, donors 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 conflicts. The aid system, which is dominated by the United Nations and donor governments, has a structural bias towards governments. Most of today's conflicts are internal as opposed to state-to-state. This results in a programmatic 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 analysis of the problem is distorted as well.

The second consequence is that the style and content of aid programs reflect a governmental as opposed to a grassroots bias. This is starting to change, albeit very slowly, in the field of

development because local organizations are challenging the effectiveness of the prevailing system. Relief, however, is still very much dominated by the notion that those in need are helpless and cannot take decisions for themselves. 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. Unfortunately, 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 pressured him to accept certain compromises 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 economic assistance 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 behind a referendum in Eritrea, for example, would likely bring about its implementation; conversely, Washington's current position in favor of an Eritrean settlement within the context of a unified Ethiopia works against the referendum proposal. ■

Give a Good Gift

send

Middle East Report

to a friend

Send check or money order for \$17.50 in US dollars and subscription information to: MERIP, Suite 119, 1500 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20005. Overseas postage: add \$18 air or \$5 surface.

