



● BRITAIN AND ETHIOPIA

The British government's belated response to the Ethiopian famine has been a clear demonstration of the ineptitude and hypocrisy which mark its dealings with the Third World, and particularly Africa.

Over the last decade all British governments have become increasingly subservient to the United States in their policies towards Africa. The old colonial self-confidence, that Britain understood the continent and could count on the leaders of its former colonies to further British interests and their own at the same time, has withered away. Economic and socio-political crisis has gripped former British favourites such as Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana largely as a result of capitalism's world crisis, and the British reaction has been to ignore its seriousness as far as possible.

British aid to the Third World has always been both an arm of politics and an adjunct of British business. As Africa became less tractable politically and less interesting to British business, the attempt to monitor what was going on there or understand it dwindled in both government and civil service. The convenient myth was born that the British people were not interested in aid or the worsening plight of Africa.

But the television pictures of the Ethiopian famine have aroused such widespread sympathy in Britain that private gifts have almost matched government aid. The Government has been forced to act at last, and is also having to face questions about its own part in the tragedy. No amount of wriggling by clever spokespeople can obliterate the enormous responsibility which should be borne by Britain for the deaths of perhaps as many as 900,000 Ethiopians in this famine, which

is worse than the notorious one ten years ago which brought down the Emperor Haile Selassie.

And that, as Professor Charles Elliot, former head of the charity Christian Aid, has so clearly and honestly explained, is the real story behind this famine. The United States led, and Britain followed, in an attempt to bring down the Ethiopian government, the Derg, by starving its citizens to death.

Exactly a year ago Ethiopia's top official responsible for relief and rehabilitation of the hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians displaced by the war and drought that has ravaged the country since the revolution in 1974, came to London to ask the British government for food aid. Major Dawit Wolde Giorgis was visibly depressed after his meeting with Mr Timothy Raison, Minister for Overseas Development. Major Dawit's quiet exposé of the 'imminent threat of famine to six million Ethiopians' met with absolutely no response from British officials who talked blandly about former colonies' needs being a priority and Zimbabwe therefore being at the top of the British aid priority list. He had had an even colder reception the previous week in the United States.

Just a year before that, the Ethiopian government, faced with a clear downward trend in food production, had asked Britain and other Western countries for a commitment of 900,000 tons of grain over three years as a reserve to prevent famine if the drought continued. Pledges of 99,000 tons were made, of which only one third arrived.

Meanwhile the long term projects which could have reversed the downward trend in agricultural production never got off the ground largely because of the West's increasingly stingy aid policies.

Fifteen years ago the United Nations General Assembly set a target of 0.7% of GNP for the industrialised nations to give as aid. Judith Hart, when she was British Minister for Overseas Aid, in October 1975 committed the Government to working towards that goal. But by 1978 the actual aid total was only 0.46% and it has now shrunk to 0.35% of GNP.

Ethiopia, one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world by every international indicator, was at the bottom of the British list of priorities for any of that tiny amount of development aid. Not only had the Ethiopian government declared a commitment to socialism, but they had actually begun to carry it out by a dramatic land reform programme which simply wiped out the landowning class and made available to the peasants the 30% of rural output which had previously been paid to the landlords. Worse, the Derg, attacked by neighbouring Somalia in the east and ill-advised enough to carry on the Emperor's war in Eritrea, turned to the Soviet Union and Cuba for extensive military assistance.

The West's inexorable disinformation machine swept into action, fuelled by the early bloody power struggles in Addis Ababa. Although the most solid Eritrean political and fighting force, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, never became much of a favourite with the Western press, the other Eritrean movements with conservative Arab funding became a serious propaganda embarrassment to the Derg. Western diplomats also took up the claims of the new-born Tigrean People's Liberation Front with unnatural enthusiasm. With convenient timing for the host of Western aid agencies still trying to demonstrate that the Derg was not the organisation aid should be given to, the TPLF captured and quickly released two Americans who emerged full of praise for their polite captors. The TPLF had become a potent weapon against the Derg's survival.

Twenty three other African countries¹ are already suffering from food shortages and the same trend of declining food production as Ethiopia. The techniques for reversing it in the long term are available, just as the grain surpluses of Europe are available to meet the short term needs. But a change in the political will to work to prevent another Ethiopia is absent among Western leaders, though not among Western electorates.

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¹Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Mali, Mauretania, Mozambique, Sao Tome, Senegal, Somalia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, Zimbabwe.