

The Politics of Famine, Media Activism, and Donor Aid in the Horn

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Overview

Ethiopia is a geostrategic country in the Horn of Africa region. This ancient country landlocked since 1991 is fractured along many political, ethnic and cultural fault lines and the recurrence of famine in the aftermath of drought and conflict is an ever-present danger. It lies in wait even in the twenty-first century when the advancement of science and technology, particularly in food production and processing, has reached astounding heights (in many instances beyond the comprehension of the ordinary citizen). By famine, we are talking not of a brief deprivation of food or a casual hunger, but prolonged mass starvation, which takes the lives of millions of people in an agonizing manner – something that I have personally witnessed during the famines of 1973, 1974, 1983, 1984, 1985 in Ethiopia and shall never forget as long as I live. I have been in the middle of mass starvation and the politics of famine not only one or two years but since the late 1950s for almost 60 years. The recurrence of this scourge, commonly known as famine or as, some would rightfully characterize it nowadays, “genocide by starvation” or famicide (Howe 2007, 345) and its consequences, is then the focus of our investigation.

A number of factors like climatic change, civil war or insurgency, internal political or economic crises, uncalled-for external involvement, and other interacting factors may play a role in the causation of the recurring famine in the Horn. Although some of the factors may have more weight than the others, identifying the decisive actors in the causation of this persistent problem is absolutely necessary if we are looking for a lasting solution. We may therefore begin by asking some pertinent questions such as: Why is this scourge occurring thick and fast in this corner of the world when human beings elsewhere have developed the capacity to produce plenty or even surplus of food and know no famine? Where exactly does the principal cause of the recurring famine in the Horn lie? Is famine really the fault of nature or man-made? If the latter, who is responsible for the frequently arising devastation of human beings and their habitat? What is the way out of such a painful brunt? Based on a number of studies conducted so far, and also from my personal observation as well, this essay addresses these crucial and related questions by way of identifying the root causes of the famine that still haunts the Horn and clearing the ground for the possible remedies.

Comprehending Famine

Famine, as “mass starvation leading to death,” has been well known since Biblical times around 3,450 year ago (*The Holy Bible*, Genesis 45: 6-11) and people of different persuasions have been grappling to fully understand and control it. Yet it looks as if there is no conclusive understanding of the centuries old term, famine, which is still with us. Why? Perhaps it has to do with the complex nature of its evolution, as it is partly political, economic, social and environmental. And it occurs also because there is lack of the will among influential actors who have the power to root out famine.

Despite the abundance of literature on famine and never-ending controversies concerning representations of famine, we may cautiously proclaim that the days of characterizing famine as an act of punishment of people by God, or simply nature's provision are almost past. Indeed, these contentions were simplistic and inadequate excuses to avoid accountability on the part of those who allowed famine to befall. Nonetheless the discourse on famine has continued unabated among humanitarians, media professionals, forecasters, legislators, academics, and so on, with no conclusive discernment or a path to solve this ageless scourge.

As the factors contributing to the emergence of famine appear to be quite many, the emphasis given to the different factors varies depending on the outlook of the concerned scholars on the matter – an outlook, which in turn is influenced by the decisive actors that would be identified below. In other words, human activities in general, fluctuation of weather, governance, vulnerability of communities (poverty coupled with lack of education), natural calamities, over-population, wars, and conflicts, are some of the factors that are commonly implicated as culprits, while the magnitude these variables contribute to the occurrence of famine is gauged at different levels by the different scholars. To most scholars, what seems to be evolving as a common theme is that famine is “human-made.” Jenny Edkins' analysis of the problem, that famine is “a socio-economic process which causes the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable and marginal groups in society” (2000, 20) and the suggestion of substituting the term “famine” with “mass starvation” to elicit effective response and accountability, looks practical for the purpose this paper is set to accomplish.

Natural phenomenon like drought or extreme weather may or may not cause mass starvation and death. That depends on the capacity and readiness of the people affected to withstand the incidental event. The capacity and readiness of a people in turn depends on how far they are organized over a period of time and what type of a leadership or governance they possess. People who are organized under an accountable democratic government, although they may encounter drought or extreme weather any time, however, will not slide into a famine situation, for they are entitled to develop through time the capacity and coping mechanisms to withstand the calamities that they may encounter. On the other hand, people under a repressive and unaccountable government are stripped of their entitlements – natural or legal – and are neither allowed to freely organize themselves and forge a policy of their making nor develop the capacity to avert such calamities. In this manner, unorganized and oppressed communities are compelled to remain vulnerable and at the mercy of natural afflictions, which are often harsh.

Famine occurs in a situation where there is vulnerable way of life overseen by inapt governments. This is why famine is attributed as human-made infliction and has no direct or rather intrinsic correlation with drought or other natural calamities. People can be starved to death or encounter famine because of self-centered policies and decisions made by cruel or inapt authorities. As climate change depends on a number of natural factors including large scale activities of humans, it follows then, lack of rain i.e., drought could occur any time any place because of one of the factors affecting the balance of nature. Many drought prone countries, led by accountable governments, do not experience famine. Only where there is failure of authorities to arm their communities with the necessary capacity to withstand the impact of natural disasters does famine evolve. This happens because irresponsible governments neglect the factors that give rise to famine while investing the lion share of their time and energy on power consolidation and fighting their political opponents, real or potential. Therefore famine is caused not by scarcity or failure of rain, change of weather, over population etc., but by the failure of authorities to enable their communities to withstand natural calamities. Their international benefactors who reinforce

the prevalence of such inapt and corrupt authorities in power are also in like manner responsible for the occurrence of famine.

Famine in the Horn

Historically, the Horn of Africa situated along the Red Sea and across the Arabia Peninsula was the conjoining region for the trade and diplomatic relations between the West and the East. Its geo-political importance grew centuries ago when the Nile River was the main highway of communication in the region before the Red Sea took over. The Red Sea that connects the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean through the narrow passage of Bab el-Mandeb is situated in the Horn. Through this passage passes the bulk of the trade merchandise between China, Japan and the rest of Asia and the West. One third of the world's oil and natural gas passes through this passage of the Horn of Africa every day. The Horn's geo-political importance, however, had its own downside. Its significance came with an unavoidable cost that made it prone to conflicts. The inference is that who controls the Horn controls the greatest commercial passage in the name of national interest.

Through centuries of foreign invasions and expansions, the region was exposed to all sorts of war calamities. The Arabs, the Turks, the British, the French and the Italians have made several incessant attempts to control the region causing the inhabitants of the Horn to engage in protracted defensive wars and consequently facing the havoc that accompanies war. The impact of the wars on the environment was ruinous and on the population incendiary, causing mass displacement, destruction of farms and animals, scarcity of food and soaring prices and hence famine. The social and economic life of communities was uprooted to the core and stable political vitality was a long way off.

The external factors that have thrown the entire region into disorder had also upset the internal cohesion and continuity of each country of the Horn of Africa. An old state like Ethiopia, situated at the center of the Horn, for instance, were ruled by warlords who partitioned the country into 28 fiercely competing regions for at least a century, from 1755 to 1855, (Henze, 2000, 119). It was a century of wars and pillage amounting to self-destruction that led to chain of famines. The predicament in the other parts of the Horn was by-and-large similar and the entire region has been ravaged by proxy wars, the repercussions of which were dreadful. Even today, the trend of indulging in proxy wars seems not to go away. In general, this circumstance has led to the formation of dependent states in the Horn whose governments are not accountable to their people, but to external powers that finance them, supply them with arms and diplomatic leverage to stay in power. Obviously, external forces have their own regional as well as global agendas that entice them to intervene in the region in the first place. Hence, famine or other calamities that threaten the lives of the ordinary people are not of prime concern to the national government and the external powers that uphold them.

Why Famine Recurs and Who Is Responsible

All countries of the Horn have been enduring, more or less, similar pitiable famine for decades. Famine in Sudan, for instance, killed 70, 000 Sudanese in 1998 (O'Grada, 2009, 24), while in Somalia between 2010 and 2011 more than 260,000 were dead as a result of famine (UN News Center, 2 May 2013). As many analysts have argued, contemporary famine in the Horn, as well as in other parts of Africa, is a system of wider and long-term economic and political difficulties: economic decline, political fragmentation and growing food insecurity (Duffield, 1992,

Woodward, 1996, 2003). Twenty-four years after Mark Duffield made this critical observation, the Horn of Africa finds itself still in growing food insecurity and political instability as a result of extant poor systems of governance where accountability is non-existent. In a more explicit stance but without identifying the real actors in the famine saga, Devereux (2007, 23) delineates:

In the past, the cause of and response to famine were localized; now they are globalized. All contemporary famines are fundamentally political, in the sense that political decisions contribute either to creating famine conditions or to failure to intervene to prevent famine.

Now let us delve into the perpetuity of famine in the Horn to identify the local and global players. However, since it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover the entire history of famine in the Horn countries, the focus shall be on the most populous country, contemporary Ethiopia, which by and large represents the other Horn nations as far as famine is concerned.

In 1973-1974, during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the worst famine in memory took the lives of over 300, 000 Ethiopians (Ofcansky and Berry, 1991). As a result, the Emperor together with the feudal system he represented were overthrown and replaced by a military junta called Derg. “The decisive event was perhaps the big famine in the north of the country, which drew a very belated and callous response from the government and which revealed its inadequacy to care for its own people” (Abbink, 1995, 65). Again under the Derg’s military government of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the deadliest disaster in the twentieth century, the 1984-1985 famine took the lives of over one million Ethiopians (Gibson, 2012, 268). The world was alarmed after the distressing scene of the famine appeared on TV screens, thanks to the concerned journalists of the international media.

Although both governments were overthrown primarily as a result of the rebellion triggered by the devastation of the famines that were allowed to occur under their watch, similar depressing story continues to reign throughout Ethiopia under the incumbent government as well. After the Derg was toppled in 1991, the leader of the EPRDF, Meles Zenawi, seized power and promised to deal with famine once and for all ‘making it a history.’ For the following 21 years, until his death in 2012, he had repeated the same pledge without any apparent result. Despite the rhetoric of Meles and his allies, and their publications of a double-digit growth economy, Ethiopia in 2016-2017 finds itself in need of massive emergency relief aid. The UN-WFP writes, “According to the 2016 Humanitarian Requirements Document, 10.2 million people in *Ethiopia* need *emergency food assistance*.”^{vi}

Table 25.1 below aims to show the number of Ethiopian people who were in need of emergency relief aid and the frequency of such a predicament since the advent of the twenty-first century to this day. The data was collected from reports of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP), as indicated chronologically.

Table 25.1 Relief Index 2000-2006

Year	Starving People (Millions)	Source
2000	2.3	WFP
2002-2003	12.6	WFP
2004	7	FAO/WFP
2006	7.2	FAO
2008	10	FAO/WFP

2009-2010	5	FAO/WFP
2011-2012	13	WFP
2013-2014	5	WFP
2015	10	WFP
2016	10.2	FAO/WFP

Source: FAO and WFP

As one can observe from Table 25.1, millions of Ethiopians were and are still in need for emergency aid almost every year. The need for the emergency aid is prompted by widely spreading starvation that could kill en mass. For unqualified reasons, various academics use different wordings like chronic hunger, extreme malnutrition, severe food shortage, etc. to describe the mass starvation that leads to numerous deaths. The point of concern in the present discussion, however, is not the selection of language but whether the stated different characterizations end up in famine that takes the lives of numerous people or leave them on the verge of death. Isn't this what matters most if we believe in the right to food and to life? Why are these painful deaths of fellow human beings repeating themselves every year in this part of the world?

If there is one thing the Horn is most known for at least since the early 1970s, no doubt it is famine. Conflict may come next to famine as a contemporary stigma of the region, but when the numbers of victims in each case are statistically gauged, those of famine are excruciatingly high. The number of people who were killed by famine in Ethiopia in 1984-1985 was over one million, and in Somalia in 2010-2011 it was 260,000, according to the UN reports of 1985 and 2011 respectively. Conflict-induced deaths, on the other hand, are much fewer, the rare case being the Ethiopian-Eritrean war of 1998, which took almost 70, 000 lives from both sides (Reuters, 2007). Yet, while the latter triggered massive international uproar, condemnation and sanctions on the government authorities that set the war in motion, those governments that allowed deadly famines to evolve, causing hundreds of thousands or in some cases millions of deaths, got by without even the slightest condemnation.

The causes of drought - failure or inadequacy of rain - are befittingly associated with nature although large-scale human activities obviously impact on the environment and could lead to aridity and desertification. The expansion of the Sahara Desert southwards is a case in point. Famine, on the other hand, which is among other factors related with drought is entirely human made. Unlike drought, which may or may not occur seasonally, famine is a cumulative effect of prolonged failure of creating sustainable basis of life and could engulf vulnerable societies even when drought is not a matter of contention. Many drought prone countries or countries known for their arid climate do not experience famine simply because they design long term ways and means to generate agricultural produce that keeps their population well fed and does not allow the negative impact of drought to lead to famine. Durable irrigation systems or sustained water conservation schemes could effectively reduce the impact of drought, thereby not allowing famine to occur. Such undertakings are manageable by a government worthy of its responsibilities. Bad governments, on the other hand, neglect their responsibilities and by not implementing the right policies at the right time expose their people to a position of vulnerability. Strictly speaking, drought that could have been overcome, with responsible planning, such as investment on water and soil conservation or irrigation schemes, when left to take its course can lead to famine. Thus, the famine in the Horn is not simply down to the weather or conflict driven - it occurs because correct measures to curb it have not been set in place.

If we compare the severity of drought in Ethiopia and Egypt, a neighbor of the Horn, one may sum up Egypt as being in perpetual drought although we do not hear of famine affecting its people. Ethiopia, on the other hand, with average rainfall and contributing as much as 80 percent of the water to the River Nile flow that continuously feeds northern Sudan and Egypt, suffers from drought-driven famine. “The incredible irony is” says Ghelawdewos Araia, (2002, 1):

while Ethiopia encounters drought and famine almost every decade (now perhaps every half a decade) despite the blessings of hundreds of major rivers and thousands of streams, Egypt with an ecology that does not witness rainfall and the country depending on the Nile waters of Ethiopia, is a major exporter of food crops, especially beans.

This looks paradoxical, yet the explanation lies in the system of governance that presided over the people affected. The authorities that run the state that controls and manages the human and material resources of the country are at the center of the infliction. “Therefore, the eradication of famine and poverty requires a radical transformation of the exercise of state power” wraps up Tsegai Mebrahtu, (2002: 6).

Famine and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)

Despite drought, we have demonstrated that famine is preventable if and only if the mechanisms to prevent it – water conservation and irrigation schemes among others – are set in place. This resolve, of course, requires a system of governance that gives primacy to the welfare of the people in question by confronting drought before it leads to famine. In the countries of the Horn where the bulk of the population depends on rain-fed agriculture, conserving the rain-water would have sufficed to grow enough crop to feed the entire population thereby averting the possibility of famine from striking. Setting in place systems of irrigation that could undercut the impact of drought would also help produce the necessary yield to block the possibility for famine arising. This is amenable to a government that takes accountability, food security and water management seriously. In Ethiopia, as evinced earlier, the failure to prevent famine and tackling it once it ensued was arguably the main cause that brought the downfall of the governments of Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1974 and 1991 respectively. Much has been written about the role these two regimes played in creating and covering up the famines that took the lives of millions of Ethiopians, hence there is no need to go into details about the ‘famine crimes’ perpetrated by these two governments.

In this section, however, I shall dwell on the role played by the ‘liberation’ fronts as epitomized by the TPLF – a relevant segment to the general account but often brushed aside or construed in a rather unethical way. The engagement of the ‘liberation’ fronts in general and that of the TPLF in particular in the famine discourse was barely touched upon. I would therefore like to incorporate the TPLF’s share in the famine riddle as it happened, for I believe it contributes to a complete picture of the recurring tragedy, with the objective of arriving at a lasting solution.

More than most regions of Ethiopia, the northern part including Tigray (the home base of the TPLF) was a region devastated by a series of wars and unforgiving famines for generations. It was the dismal situation of the people that gave rise to the formation of the TPLF which vowed to resolve the generations-old problems, famine being at top of the list. The people of Tigray plainly trusted the front and gave everything including their sons and daughters to the struggle, hoping the TPLF would end their misery and bring about peace and prosperity. Soon, the time came when the TPLF was to be tested.

Following severe droughts in most parts of the region, experience had made it clear that famine would take place if nothing has been done in advance to avert it. Not heeding such bitter experiences and as the 1984-1985 famine was fast looming, the TPLF was preoccupied with preparation of celebrating its 10th anniversary and the formation of a new party, the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) within the front. Suggestions to postpone the ceremonial hustle and pay due attention to the impending famine by members of the Front were flatly rejected by the politburo of which I was a member and privy to all inner debates and discussions (for details see Berhe, 2009, 177). What transpired was folly.

At a time when the greater part of Tigray was facing the worst famine in memory, the responses of both the government and the front were much the same and unnerving. The intended response of the Mengistu government was to resettle the affected people in southern Ethiopia, far away from the TPLF-held territory. By so doing, the regime surmised it would deny the support the TPLF used to garner from the people. Dubious as it was, the plan could only work partially as the vast majority of the affected people were far beyond the reach of the government; it was the TPLF that controlled the greater part of Tigray and its people.

The TPLF's actual response, on the other hand, was to move the affected people to Sudan where international publicity was readily available and food aid could be generated. Therefore, according to the plans of the TPLF, thousands had to make a trek of hundreds of kilometers under scorching sun of the Ethiopian and Sudanese lowlands. There was no adequate preparation, nor capable people to handle the mass exodus, which "included the evacuation of over 200,000 people to Sudan" (de Waal 1997, 129). Many perished on the way for lack of basic support of food, medicine and guidance. Seyoum Mesfin, then head of the TPLF foreign bureau, reported to the TPLF congress held at the time that 13,000 lives were buried in the sand on the way to the Sudan.

At this moment, TPLF leaders and cadres stationed abroad were rushing from Sudan to Worii, one of the base areas of the TPLF, in Tigray where a founding congress of the new ultra-left party, the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray, was to be held from July 12-15, 1985. Seyoum Mesfin led the overseas-based TPLF contingent and had brought US\$100 million with him. The money was part of the emergency relief fund collected from donors on behalf of the famine victims and was handed over to the organization's office of the Central Committee (CC) at Worii. Because the Mengistu regime made it extremely difficult to get food aid into the rebel-held territories of the north, another channel of collecting money by the front was the scheme called "internal purchase," when donors come with their cash to the "liberated" zone of the TPLF, ostensibly to buy grain as food for the starving population. What actually happened was veteran TPLF cadres posed as merchants to receive the aid money to buy grain, which in fact was pre-arranged stocks of the Front. A controversial story entitled "Ethiopia famine aid 'spent on weapons'" was compiled by BBC World Service Africa editor.ⁱⁱ At the end of July 1985, the Central Committee of the TPLF/MLLT met to determine, among other things, the budget of the Front and the then established party, MLLT. The allocation of the money in hand went as follows: 50percent to MLLT, 45 percent to TPLF and 5 percent to famine victims. There was no considerable opposition to the financial outlays, except for one powerless voice that pleaded to raise the amount for famine victims in whose cause the fund was collected.

The appropriation of the fund and its subsequent allocation was a pattern that has been going on under the pretext of financing various organizational relief and developmental projects. This pattern of diverting relief aid for political and military purposes continued until the TPLF ousted the military regime in May 1991. In a rather carefully worded statement but asserting that the front used the aid money for its war projects, Alex de Waal (1997, 130) who wrote extensively

about the TPLF asserts, “The front used its aid far better: it mobilized people in a war against tyranny, while Mengistu used relief to reinforce oppression.” Although there was no evidence to support the idea that the TPLF is less tyrannical than Mengistu, de Waal’s assertion reflects only that the TPLF used the aid for war. De Waal (1997, 129) does not stop there but continues, “In mid-1984, the TPLF made its *strategic priority* the struggle against famine. ...The TPLF was not a conventional army diverting relief grain, rather it was a political front mobilizing a classic ‘people’s war.’” Finally, he declares, “The TPLF ultimately *won its war against Famine*” (de Waal, 130, emphasis added). The reality on the ground, however, was diametrically opposed to these assertions. One could simply refer to the annual (2016 included) reports of the FAO or WFP as partly cited above. Nineteen years after de Waal wrote those words, famine and the TPLF are still prevailing in Ethiopia. De Waal theorizes about famine crimes but does not say a word about those who could also be considered famine opportunists such as Meles and Sibhat Nega, head of the economic department of the TPLF and its Chairman for some time.

Here we must ask whether aid agencies were primarily preventing famine from recurring or promoting the regional or global objectives there by allowing famine to persist rather than fade away.

Funding Agencies and the Front

Conversant with the humanitarian activities of neighboring fronts in Eritrea and Sudan, the TPLF felt the need of establishing a humanitarian wing right from the beginning of its struggle against the much stronger army of the military government in Ethiopia. In 1976, the TPLF formed its own humanitarian branch called the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and Abadi Zemo, a veteran cadre, was posted as its director. REST was entrusted with the task of designing relief and/or developmental projects and raise money from voluntary funding agencies. The projects designed ranged from water and soil conservation to building terraces and from “internal purchase” of grain for food to farm equipment and oxen. On paper, all the designs pass as excellent projects that could transform the lives of impoverished communities in Tigray. Given the well-crafted project proposals, there was no problem of procuring large amount of resources both in cash and in kind from the humanitarian aid agencies.

On the ground, however, the version was totally different; either the projects do not exist or there were only symbolic projects that helped keep the continuation of the fund flow. One vivid example was the Shiwata project of water and soil conservation, which began in a few plots of arid land in the vicinity of a village called Shiwata, in the district of Abergele, Tembien. As it started, it showed promising results of voluminous harvest, and funding agencies showed their determination to continue their support after looking into the pictorial reports of the initial outcome of the pilot project. Sadly enough, the project could not stretch from its pilot standing to cover the small village let alone expand to other arid districts. The TPLF had aborted the promising project by diverting the funds to its war efforts. The self-serving leaders of the Front eclipsed a project that could have been developed to a level that sustained the livelihoods of millions of farmers and their families. Thirty-five years later, after the induction of the Shiwata project, drought driven famine is still tearing down the district and its environs.

Shiwata is just one case among numerous projects through which fund was generated to finance the costly war project of the TPLF. The Front by then had an army of about 35,000 regular fighters and double that number of militias. It had to feed and equip its big army to fight the government forces, which were financed and armed by the former Soviet Union. Though the Front claimed to have the support of the people, there was no way to translate the claimed

support materially. Famine stricken people in no position to support themselves justifiably could not support the costly war project of the Front.

The flow of relief and development aid that started at least since the Ethiopian famine of the 1958 which took 100,000 lives while leaving 9 million people destitute (Mariam, 1986, Zewde, 2002) is still going on. 58 years on 10.2 million people are starving to death and in need of emergency relief aid worth US\$ 1.4 billion.ⁱⁱⁱ The famine situation in Somalia and South Sudan is for the most part the same, with 1.3 million people in Somalia (Reliefweb, 2016) and 2.8 million in South Sudan (UN WFP, 2016) on the verge of death. The flow of the enormous amount of aid for almost six decades has not changed the situation of famine in the Horn of Africa. The famine and the same ill-suited actions to tackle it are still with us.

It is imperative to scrutinize the engagement of the powerful governments in this huge business of relief and developmental aid in relation to the footing of the TPLF. This may also throw light on the overall aid business to African countries that has been running for more than five decades now but without apparent success. This very question into the role played by the powerful governments such as the US is crucial matter that is blocking a thorough understanding of famine and its ultimate solution.

To run its protracted war against the heavily armed military government of the Derg, the TPLF needed huge fund that could not be procurable from the impoverished people. The bulk of the fund, which the TPLF utilized for its military ventures, came mainly from European public donations and government grants through voluntary agencies commonly known as NGOs in the form of relief aid. NGOs obviously are obliged to operate within the legal bounds and approval of their respective governments. The NGO-government linkage thence entails a political chemistry to which both sides adhere, particularly in relation to who should be supported and why. This complex and undeclared component of the relationship reflects the often-reiterated rationale that “there is no aid without strings.” To illustrate this point, in her 1987 article “Ethiopia and the Politics of Famine Relief”, Gayle Smith, then a journalist and currently the Administrator of USAID, quoted former US Secretary of Agriculture John Block, who said: “In the coming years, food aid will prove to be the most powerful weapon of the US” (Smith, 1987, 35). She goes on to note that:

In early 1985, Vice-President George Bush flew to the Sudanese capital accompanied by aid Administrator Peter MacPherson and officials of the American-based Christian Broadcasting Network and Americares Foundation, both key players in the ‘private aid’ network supporting the contra rebels in Nicaragua. ...All signs indicated that the EPLF and/or the TPLF might be tapped to serve as Reagan’s contras in the Horn of Africa.

In her conclusion, Smith frames a striking case in point:

As long as famine prevails, the US will be able to maintain some leverage over all parties to the conflict. Far from being simply a crisis requiring a humanitarian response, the African famine which began in 1982 bears grave political consequences for the Horn and for the entire continent.
(Smith 1987, 37)

Indeed, famine has been an instrument of political objective and will remain so as long as the politics of the big powers does not change.

Let us look into the actual thinking of the leading US policy formulators. US Senator Hubert Humphrey in 1957 said:

I have heard ... that people may become dependent on us for food. To me that is a good news – because before people can do anything they have got to eat. And if you are looking for a way to get people to lean on you and be dependent on you, in terms of their co-operation with you, it seems to me that food dependence would be terrific.

(Hayter 1983, 86)

If food dependency is considered a terrific matter by powerful authorities, they all have their reasons to sustain poverty in its “ugliest” form, famine. This malignant notion continued to reverberate with other leaders of the US administration. President Nixon for one puts it nakedly: “Let us remember that the main purpose of aid is not to help other nations but to help ourselves” (Hayter 1983, 83-84). Seemingly contradictory, President Reagan was widely quoted in the media to have said, “A hungry child knows no politics” (Natsios 1997, cited in Howe 2007, 356). But for the Reagan Administration, the famine that struck in 1984 provided the opportunity to intervene more directly in Ethiopia’s role in the Horn of Africa. “Between 1977 and 1983, US policy towards Ethiopia was shaped in reaction to the presence of the Soviet Union” (Smith 1987, 35). It set in motion “an Inter-Agency Task Force on the African Famine comprising representatives of the Department of Defense, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, AID and the Department of Agriculture.” Headed by General (ret) Julius Bectin, the Task Force would play a critical role in determining who was fed and who starved in Africa’s Horn. Smith concludes, “It now appears that the decrease in food assistance to Ethiopia and the failure to provide relief until the famine had reached catastrophic proportions was primarily a means of positioning the US,” to exert more regional influence (1987, 36).^{2iv}

The goal of extending aid often seems to be to energize agreeable partners such as the TPLF in the global or regional confrontation against real or potential adversaries and not to curb the impact of famine

Evidently, the aid flow had started at least since the late 1950, but more was coming forth since 1974 after the BBC journalist Jonathan Dimbleby in a TV documentary revealed to the world the horrifying famine in northern Ethiopia. The aid might have saved some lives, but certainly did not end famine. Ten years later famine struck again, as reported by Michael Buerk and Mohamed Amin of the BBC in 1984, despite the continuous flow of the relief and developmental aid in between. Aid and famine continued to exist side-by-side although the former was intended to stamp out the latter. By maintaining this unholy balance between aid and famine, the TPLF toppled the military regime and seized power in Ethiopia under an umbrella organization known as Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991. Yet, 28 years later, the nature of the aid and the recurrence of the famine have not changed. As we speak, over 10.2 million Ethiopians are in need of emergency relief aid according to the 2016 reports of UN-WFP/FAO, Oxfam, Menschen für Menschen (MfM), USAID, Relief Web, etc. The rebel-turned-government of the TPLF/EPRDF, moreover, continued the aid business as usual, but this time officially with the donor governments while famine lingers routinely.⁵

The emergency relief aid that has been flowing for the last 50 plus years may have saved some lives at every famine event and triggered the overthrow of repressive governments, but miserably failed in arresting famine itself. While the situation of the age-old famine persists, the relationship of the front-turned-government, the donor governments and the aid agencies remains intact and the famine business goes on as it used to be. When the objective of the Front falls within the bounds of the strategic objective of the powerful government, reminiscent of the cold war alignment or nowadays of anti-terrorism alliance, evidently the donor governments strive for

ways and means to bolster the position of their partner in the interest of the global or regional strategy. This situation leaves the vulnerability of the people as it is and the imminence of famine alive.

Famine and the Role of Media

In the above deliberation we have seen how and to what end Western powerful states have been intervening in the famine-prone region of the Horn of Africa. They have been working with inapt regimes in Africa whose policies have been paving the way for the recurrence of famine for decades. In this perplexing process, the international media has been active in playing both positive and negative roles. Without losing sight of role the media have played in mitigating the impact of famine by alerting and mobilizing people to help the already victimized people, it is compelling to explore the role of the media in these issues.

Media bring the tragedy of famine to the attention of the international audience partly to initiate donors and streamline their donation to save lives. This task of motivating and mobilizing remotely situated publics, NGOs and donor government to raise relief aid is not an easy one and is complementary to a genuine humanitarian endeavor. By the same action, the media exposes the responsible authorities that overlooked the outburst of such calamity. No doubt this is a worthwhile humane contribution and the media has to be commended for this role.

Yet every time famine strikes, the media rush to the scene of the tragedy once the famine has already inflicted a visible proportion of damage. Then the media covers the story for a brief period, usually until the horrifying scene subsides. The next time one hears of the media is when and if similar famine strikes again. The same old coverage followed by the same fundraising effort repeats itself without looking deeper into the real causes and lasting solutions to the famine. In this case, the media to this day has failed to underscore the fact that relief aid is only an emergency or temporary solution and could not prevent famine from happening again, but from the outset, they give the impression that they are there to mediate a solution once and for all. The immediate step of providing first aid, understandably, captures massive popularity in the face of a starving mass. In this manner, relief aid bears the marks of a legitimate solution, disguising the root causes and the permanent solution of famine. However, the big question is why is famine recurring year after year and decade after decade? What are the root-causes of famine and how should famine be tackled once and for all? These are questions the media fail to answer and that is the crux of the matter. Johan Helland (2000, 1) rightly points out:

As famine evolves, resources are mobilized, mostly through the attention of the international media and eventually successful famine relief effort, (by and large) are organized. If such efforts were exerted to identify and tackle the root causes of famine which is the more important approach of solving the problem of famine all together, people would not have to suffer in a recurring famine.

This does not mean, however, that there were no attempts by daring journalists and other writers to dig into the intricacies surrounding the famine predicament, including reports of how relief aid was diverted by the TPLF to feed its army and buy weapons. The evidence of the misuse of the relief aid was procured from veteran TPLF members who were part of the decision-making process and execution of diverting the relief fund. In the midst of the crisis, a CIA report stated that aid was “almost certainly being diverted for military purposes.”⁶ Also, in *Mail Online* March 17, 2010, Richard Dowden notes:

Bob Houdek, a former US ambassador to Addis Ababa, revealed that former rebels now in government had admitted to him that some of the food aid was ‘monetarised’—i.e. sold for money to buy weapons.

Indeed, a 105-page investigative report published by Human Rights Watch (2010) documented the ways in which the EPRDF regime continued to manipulate relief aid for political power. It states, “The Ethiopian government is using development aid to suppress political dissent by conditioning access to essential government programs on support for the ruling party.” If famine is to be prevented effectively such that it may not ravage fellow human being and undermine our common humanity again and again, the role of the media has to be exposing the root-causes of famine that spark permanent remedies. In this age, when human beings have already developed the capacity to harvest valuable assets from outer space and below the surface of the earth, it could not have been that complex to prevent famine. The media ought to question and unmask the root causes of the failure to end famine. In a stark comparative observation Bahru Zewde (2003, 7), notes: “Surprisingly enough, the extent and severity of famine has tended to be directly proportional to the sophistication of our development strategies and the redoubling of our efforts to combat famine”. Being at a vantage point, the media is tasked to place accountability where it belongs. Once the root-causes of famine are well established, all efforts could be directed towards tackling the dilemma and concerned actors would be in position to take the necessary steps. For one, local governments, international agencies and NGOs could focus on long-range ethical investments rather than perpetuating inadequate emergency aid that has taken us nowhere.

Conclusion

When people starve en mass to death, it is famine i.e. genocide by starvation instead of by bullets. This devastating phenomenon is still a reality in the Horn of Africa. Even in this year, 2017, millions of people are trapped in famine. As always, emergency relief aid has been the response to the recurring calamity. Although such emergence response may have saved the lives of some lucky ones, the long-term dismal impact on the population affected and the shadow it casts over the root causes of the disaster is immense. This process obstructs the realization of essential remedies and allows famine to surface again and again.

Given adequate knowledge - among others, the “famine early warning systems” run by governments, UN and NGOs and the advanced capacity to produce the necessities for life and harness the vagaries of nature developed by many nations and international bodies - the fact that all the attempts to curb famine have failed so far tells us that either the root causes of the scourge were not bluntly addressed or were knowingly ignored. Evidently, where the preponderant concern of national governments and international forces is not the well-being of their people but power through which they could impose their will by restraining their adversaries, ordinary people are exposed to multiple challenges in this permanently changing world. There are no chances of famine emerging when such challenges are confronted by a government that is ethically principled and accountable. It is therefore the failure of the authorities at the helm of state power that have the ability to mobilize and command the human and material resources of a nation and advance preparedness in the event of calamities that are at the center of the problem. When such authorities secure the backing of international forces for reasons other than the well-being of the people, the chances of famine re-emerging is self-evident, as one can observe in the Horn of Africa at present.

The real cause of famine lies in the irresponsible practices of political forces at national and international levels (Thurow and Kilman 2010). As long as these forces pursue the same old path of tackling famine that has brought the entire Horn to where it is now, things will only get worse with conflicts, displacement of people, desertification and other looming disasters. Paul Streeten has observed, “It is not political will that we should be studying’ - or worry about - ‘but how to create the political base ... to demand of our leaders an increased commitment to fight hunger across the world” (Streeten 1984 cited in Devereux et al., 2008, 138). Our goal should be creating the political base to empower leaders who literally feel the pain of starving people and stand on their behalf. Evidently, famine and all related quandaries are preventable, but require the conviction of accountable, governing bodies together with the scrutiny of bold media and the endeavor of critical visionaries who are an integral part of an organized civil society.

Notes

1. A joint Government and Humanitarian Partners’ Document, the *2016 Ethiopia Humanitarian Requirements Document* can be accessed online: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/ethiopia_hrd_2016.pdf
2. The BBC news report “Ethiopia Famine Aid ‘Spent on Weapons’” by Martin Plaut, the Africa editor of the BBC World Service can be accessed online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8535189.stm>
After a complaint from the Band Aid Trust about this report, the BBC concluded that there was no evidence that Band Aid funds were diverted to rebels to buy guns, a point that the journalist made in the report. The BBC concluded that such allegations “should not have been broadcast.” www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/com-reports/ecu/ecu_bandaidmoneydonatedethiopia
3. The official press release by the Permanent Mission of Ethiopia to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland can be accessed online: <http://www.ethiopianmission.ch/2016/04/06/drought-in-ethiopia-humanitarian-partners-call-for-more-action/>
4. The BBC news report “Ethiopia Famine Aid ‘Spent on Weapons.’”
5. www.wfp.org/countries/Ethiopia, 2016; www.usaid.gov/ethiopia/food-assistance;
<http://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/humanitarian-action-children-2016-ethiopia>
6. The CIA report can be accessed online: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t00589r000200160004-5

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