

Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Disease stalks the continent

But with no relevant official willing to give a precise picture, its true extent is being covered up.

Epidemics are on the march throughout Africa, but their true extent is being covered up, delaying relatively simple treatment for some diseases which are otherwise sure killers. Meanwhile, with no official willing to give precise figures on how far diseases have spread, one may be sure, thousands are dying.

Famine, malnutrition, and lack of basic infrastructure are the "objective" causes—i.e., the policies of the International Monetary Fund through which genocide is being inflicted on the continent.

The vast majority of Africans have no access to clean drinking water—on average only 25% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa does, according to the World Bank's figures—which puts them at great risk to disease. This, combined with the general level of undernourishment, leaves the population unable to resist the slightest infection.

Of greatest immediate concern is a cholera epidemic now spreading throughout Somalia. A Red Cross spokesman in Geneva said that 1,000 people have already died of the disease, and 300,000 more are at risk. The spokesman said that the number of new cases was increasing every day, although the number of deaths is now decreasing.

The cholera victims are all in or around a makeshift refugee camp at Gannad, near Hargeisa. 46,000 refugees from neighboring Ethiopia are crowded on a hill on the edge of Hargeisa, with no water supply or sanitation. "Cholera is caused by dirty

water," said the Red Cross official. "In a typical situation, a refugee camp has dry latrines. Then comes flash flooding, and excrement is washed all over the place." Recent heavy rains have washed infected soil into the water supply of the town of Hargeisa, where 250,000 people live.

Cholera is caused by bacteria, *Vibrio Cholera*. A spokesman for the World Health Organization in Geneva said that cholera had first appeared in Africa in 1970, but now it is widespread. "There has been a lot of cholera in West Africa this year, and rumors of cholera in Ethiopia and Sudan." Prevention of the disease is relatively simple: "Good sanitation and clean drinking water prevent the spread of cholera." Treatment for cholera victims is also relatively simple, involving rehydration, with fluids, sodium, and potassium.

The situation has to be desperate before any government will publicly announce that cholera is spreading: It is considered almost a matter of national security. The Red Cross official I spoke to, for example, refused to name other countries where cholera is spreading, although he admitted that it was "widespread." "The only person who can announce the presence of cholera is the local minister of health, so that's why organizations talk of 'diseases with cholera-like symptoms.'"

Antibiotics and rehydration solutions are being sent to the area, but it is obvious that the hundreds of thousands of refugees, weakened by malnutrition and famine, will quickly suc-

cumb unless massive efforts are made to bring in adequate food supplies and infrastructure.

Even in "normal" times, 80% of the children in Sudan suffer from diseases like dysentery, measles, bilharzia, scurvy, and hepatitis. Sleeping sickness is also endemic in many parts of Africa. In Sudan, the disease has spread throughout the south of the country, with 1.5 million people at risk.

There are two kinds of sleeping-sickness parasite spread by the tsetse fly. One is the Gambian strain, mostly found in Zaire and the Central African Republic. A new strain is the Rhodesian parasite, which if not treated rapidly, kills within six months. This type is said to be endemic in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

The European Community is involved in a \$180 million program to eliminate the tsetse fly in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique using pesticides. The aim is to open up vast areas of land for cattle raising, land at present unused because the tsetse fly also infects cattle with a disease called nagana.

But the *Sunday Times* of London reported last month that this campaign was running into opposition from environmentalists and an unnamed international bank, who claim that the war against the tsetse fly is clearing land which is "too fragile to support intensive cattle ranching for more than a few years." The bank is reported to be backing a film called "The End of Eden," showing that "opening up Africa to unsuitable forms of exploitation—such as large-scale cattle raising—will, in destroying its ecology, destroy its economic viability in the long term."

Is this the start of an international campaign by environmentalist organizations to save the killer tsetse fly?