

# The West Is Responsible for Ethiopia's Tragedy

by Uwe Friesecke

On Good Friday, the U.S. vessel *Fairbanks* finally arrived in Djibouti, to unload 85,000 tons of relief goods, the bulk of which was wheat, to be distributed by a number of non-government relief organizations and the United Nations World Food Program. The U.S. government has scheduled to ship almost 500,000 tons of food aid to Ethiopia over the next four months. Of these, 90,000 tons are repayment to the Ethiopian government to replenish its Food Security Reserve. Since April 12, the International Committee of the Red Cross has been operating an airlift with relief goods into Gode, an airport in the middle of Ethiopia's Ogaden region, where about 500,000 people are most dramatically affected by the drought. A number of other countries, including Canada, Israel, Norway, and European Union (EU) nations, have also begun to bring food into the area. And on April 19, a team of specialists from the German Technische Hilfswerk (Technical Aid) flew from their recently opened base in Nairobi, Kenya, into Gode with water purification equipment, including a laboratory mounted on a truck to replenish a desperately needed water supply. On April 20, the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission of the Ethiopian government updated its estimates to about 8 million people who, in the next six months, will need approximately 1 million tons of food aid and \$45 million worth of water supply, health care, veterinary services, and logistics to back up the relief effort.

On the surface, it looks like the international relief effort has, even though slowly, gained steam, to prevent an all-out disaster of the magnitude Ethiopia experienced in 1984, when more than 1 million starved to death, or Somalia, where in 1991-92, hundreds of thousands died. But, more fundamentally, the crisis is far from being under control. Because, what will happen, if the three-year drought continues? And, what is the perspective for the other countries, including Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, and parts of Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda, which are currently not as much in the headlines as Ethiopia? In these countries, another 8-10 million people are threatened by a severe food crisis. Are all of the countries in the Horn of Africa going to disintegrate into thousands of feeding stations for the desperately hungry, depending on the so-called generosity of Western humanitarian aid, delivered through ever new non-governmental organizations (NGOs)?

The aid that is flowing right now into the Horn of Africa

should not deceive anybody, that the long-term policy of Western governments vis-à-vis Africa is the reason for the humanitarian catastrophe. And, it cannot excuse the late hour at which help was delivered, which has probably cost hundreds, if not thousands of lives already. It cannot justify the self-righteous blame that some governments and a large part of the Western press are putting on the Ethiopian government, for having not done enough to avert the crisis.

## Ethiopia: Still One of the Poorest Countries

For Ethiopians, there may be many reasons to criticize their government. But the fundamental problem lies elsewhere. The chances that Ethiopia would see a real "peace dividend," in the form of rapid economic development, after the end of the Cold War in 1990, was missed, as in so many other regions of the world. The governments of the Group of Seven steered the world economy toward globalization, and the resulting worldwide increase in poverty and economic disintegration, rather than into development and eradication of poverty. In these strategic decisions during 1989-94, no African government, let alone the Ethiopian government, had any influence over. This was, and still is, entirely the responsibility of the G-7 governments and their fanatical clinging to the so-called free-market-reform model.

For the last eight years, since 1992, Ethiopia has followed such a reform policy of structural adjustment. The policy measures included the complete liberalization of prices, the devaluation of the birr, the national currency, privatization of state enterprises, liberalization of the foreign exchange and interest rate system, deregulation of the labor market, and tight fiscal and monetary policies. By the end of 1996, Ethiopia was declared the model student of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Africa, replacing Ghana in that role. In December 1996, the Consultative Group for Ethiopia, led by the World Bank, granted the country \$2.5 billion in new loans for 1996-99; Ethiopian Finance Minister Sufian Ahmed had only requested \$2 billion.

However, the unstinting praise for the Ethiopian government lasted only until October 1997, when the IMF suspended its adjustment facility because the liberalization of the trade and banking sector had not gone far enough. According to World Bank figures, the Ethiopian economy, measured in Gross Domestic Product, had grown at rates of 7-10% yearly.

But, this statistical growth was not reflected in the physical economy. While there has been improvement compared to the war years, major social indicators show, Ethiopia still remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

According to the UN Children's Fund (Unicef) State of the World's Children Report 2000, in 1998 Ethiopia had a mortality rate for children under 5 of 173 per 1,000 live births. Together with the Central African Republic, it ranks 18th from the bottom of 190 nations; Sierra Leone is the worst, with 319. Some 60 million Ethiopians have an average life expectancy at birth of 43 years. According to World

## Zenawi: For Dignity and Economic Development

*From the Keynote Address of Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, to a Symposium in honor of the late Dr. Eshetu Chole, on April 26, 2000:*

The experience we have had also shows how vulnerable the progress we make in the economic area is to outside factors and to decisions made by our partners in development cooperation. Here, the choices we face, as has been clear to us over the past few years, are very stark. It is a choice, no matter the merit of one's case and no

matter how one fulfills one's obligation, between one's dignity as a sovereign nation and the cooperation of one's partners.

We have made a choice over the last two years, and these have had their consequences for our economy, and for even greater progress we could have made over the last eight years.

This is, of course, a dilemma faced by countries such as Ethiopia. Is it possible for countries such as Ethiopia to make socio-economic progress while maintaining their dignity as nations, and maintaining their independence as sovereign countries?

Some might argue that countries in similar circumstances as Ethiopia should be pragmatic. But the point, however, is where does pragmatism end and absolute surrender of one's dignity as a nation commence?

Bank Development Indicators for 1998, only 55% of Ethiopians have access to health care. There are only four doctors per 100,000 people. Some 90% of the population has no access to sanitation, and only 27% has access to safe water. In education, only 31% attend primary school. Children especially are prone to diseases. Only half of Ethiopia's children are immunized against measles. Diarrhea, HIV, and tuberculosis are endemic. According to a recent Oxfam report, the malnutrition rate among children, because the level of poverty in the countryside is so dramatic, is approximately 60%.

The government of President Meles Zenawi, which came to power in Addis Ababa in the summer of 1991, did begin to channel significant resources into the rehabilitation of infrastructure and agricultural development to rebuild the shattered economy, which the war years had left behind. Because 86% of the population depends on agriculture, the government launched an Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization strategy, and an agricultural extension program. According to Vice Minister for Agriculture Belay Ejigu, this policy yielded significant results. It increased annual food grain production by about 25%. In 1996, Ethiopia had a record harvest. But the current crisis shows, that the policy was unable to catapult the country's food production to levels needed for long-term food security. The question is, what is the problem, that Ethiopia seemingly cannot break out from the level of poverty and out of the cycle of life-threatening crises caused by recurring droughts?

When the group around Zenawi came to power, the United States and Britain created a framework, through the Bretton Woods institutions, in which these former Marxists had no choice but to make a drastic turnaround toward so-called free-market economic reforms. They were pointed to Yoweri Mu-

seveni's policy in Uganda, as an alleged success story, and promised that privatization and liberalization of the economy would attract international investors to make the economy bloom.

Tragically, the Ethiopian government proudly designed its own structural adjustment policy. But over the years, it painfully realized, that these Western promises were not to be fulfilled, and the country remains vulnerable to periods of drought.

For example, the promised investors never came. Of 3,500 government projects approved during 1992-97, valued at 27 billion birr, only 700 projects worth 5 billion birr were built. To increase the productivity of agriculture decisively, and to shift away from subsistence farming in order to achieve long-term food security, the economy needs a completely different scope of large-scale investments than any private enterprise can deliver. To have enough water, means functioning infrastructure, especially in transportation and energy, and enough inputs, such as fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, and machinery. The water scarcity and general lack of infrastructure in rural areas can only be solved through large-scale infrastructure projects, which go beyond the financing capability of the national government.

The World Bank and the IMF will simply not allow such projects. To at least triple or quadruple fertilizer input, from 7-8 kilograms of nutrients per hectare today (the world average is 97 kilograms), would mean a significant increase in imports and the buildup of a modern fertilizer industry. Under structural adjustment, this has been impossible. While the government implemented structural adjustment policy prescriptions, Western governments, led by the EU, cut long-term development assistance to Ethiopia from \$1 billion in 1991, to about \$600 million in 1997. The EU even cut its

assistance by two-thirds, from 73.5 million European Currency Units in 1993 to only ECU 24.7 million in 1997.

### **‘The Debt Must Be Paid’**

Not only did Western governments prevent real development in Ethiopia over the last eight years, but they also insisted mercilessly on the repayment of the debt. According to the World Bank African Development Indicators 2000, Ethiopia has been paying approximately \$150 million annually throughout the 1990s, and still the total foreign external debt increased from \$9.1 billion in 1991 to \$10.1 billion in 1998. Instead of financing needed infrastructure, Western banks collected more than \$1 billion from the budget of one of the poorest countries of the world, stealing it from expenditures for health and education.

Such scandalous practice typifies Western policies toward Africa, which are dominated by London and Wall Street interests, and has Paris, Brussels, and Berlin as culpable partners. A year ago, at a conference of African finance and planning ministers, President Zenawi attacked Western policy, saying that the debt reduction initiatives were “far from adequate,” and were being used “as the whip to enforce unquestioning acceptance of the economic orthodoxy, the so-called ‘Washington Consensus,’ ” i.e., IMF austerity.

### **Government Efforts to Cope with the Food Crisis**

Drawing lessons from earlier droughts, the Ethiopian government established a Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC), a famine early warning system, and an Emergency Food Security Reserve (EFSR). Since 1994-95, the EFSR had grown to 315,500 tons. Thanks to the early warning system, the government realized already in 1998 that the drought would soon seriously affect portions of the population. Therefore, the first international appeals for food aid were launched by the DPPC in December 1998 and January 1999.

The lack of February-May rains in 1999 led to a deteriorating situation in the northeastern highlands. Livestock died by the thousands, and families began to flee. It was further complicated by the effects of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, which had started with an Eritrean invasion near Badme in May 1998 that produced thousands of refugees. When the September-November 1999 rains failed for the southern regions, the DPPC in October started sending food from Ethiopia’s reserves to the affected areas, and launched a “bridging appeal” to cover the expected additional needs for the first three months of 2000. Following that, the Ethiopian government, together with donor organizations, NGOs, and UN agencies, made a joint assessment of the fall harvest and concluded that for the year 2000, approximately 8 million Ethiopians would need food relief. By the time the DPPC made its appeal to the international community in January 2000, the

UN and the Western governments were fully aware of the looming crisis, because they themselves were involved in analyzing it. According to Ethiopian government spokesmen, between January and March 2000, the DPPC transported 101,000 tons of food to the affected areas to be distributed to the people in need. An additional 102,400 tons, of which 20,000 tons are earmarked for the Somali region, are being distributed now. But, the response of the international community was abysmal.

Not only did the Western governments and the UN fail to pledge sufficient food aid for the future, but they also stalled on replenishing the food they had borrowed from the Ethiopian Food Security Reserve, which by the end of 1999 was drawn down to less than 25,000 tons. While the Western governments miss no occasion to demand respect for human rights, they simply ignored a life-threatening crisis for 8 million people in Ethiopia and up to 18 million in the region.

One can only agree with Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Measfin, who complained during the EU-African summit in Cairo on April 4, that Europe only reacts, when skeletons appear on TV. It took UN Secretary General Kofi Annan until April 11 to send Catherine Bertini, the executive director of the World Food Program, as his personal envoy to the region to assess the seriousness of the crisis.

The same can be said of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a self-appointed champion of human rights, who sent the government’s Africa envoy, Ambassador von Strachwitz, to Ethiopia only during the second week of April. Whereas she called for immediate and unconditional aid, after she had been shocked by what she saw in the Ogaden, and after she met the Ethiopian President, Fischer insists on virtually blackmailing Ethiopia over the conflict with Eritrea. His initiative, that the UN Security Council should decide on an arms embargo against Ethiopia and Eritrea, which is apparently supported by Annan, amounts to a double punishment of Ethiopia, by the threat of famine and by the denial of its right to defend itself.

Such hypocritical attitudes on the part of Western political leaders, such as Fischer, or Britain’s Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, have unfortunately become commonplace, and it is the clearest indication of how deep the morality in Western governments has sunk, when it comes to the fate of Africa.

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