

## FULL STATEMENT ON FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA - THE SOCIOECONOMIC ORIGIN OF FAMINE

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### 1. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It may be appropriate to give a brief introduction about my credentials to talk about famine. It was in 1959, the first year I started teaching at the University College of Addis Abeba that I heard about famine in Tigray the region from where the Weyyane emerged. In order to verify the rumour and break the official silence I took the bus to Tigray. From Maychew, Quiha and Meqele to Addigrat and the western towns of Tigray I saw the most horrible sight of corpses of men, women and children in all the streets. When I returned to Addis Abeba I tried to publish my observations on the newspapers. It was impossible. I waited until Atse Haile Sillase returned from Moscow and wrote a letter to him. A few days later, I received a letter ordering me to join the group that was being sent to Tigray to distribute 20,000 quintals of grain. I participated in that and when no more grain was arriving for the multitudes of famine victims I could not stay there any longer and returned to Addis. I had never been so ashamed of humanity with all its grandiose religious and social values as I was then. I had never been ashamed of being an Ethiopian and of the sense of pride and honour that went with it as I was then. I felt helpless and totally useless. The only success was that the famine of Tigray became public knowledge. The sight of famine could not be erased from my mind. Even in my sleep, I revisited those horrifying, depressing and painful scenes. In 1976 when I refused to teach in accordance with Marxist-Leninist principles, I designed a research project on famine and with some assistance from Clark University, my Alma Mater, conducted a thorough research for nearly eight years. In 1984, I published a book under the title: *RURAL VULNERABILITY TO FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA: 1958-1977*. After that, with some assistance from the University of Bern, I embarked on a field research to test the previous mainly archival research. In 1991, I published: *SUFFERING UNDER GOD'S ENVIRONMENT: A VERTICAL STUDY OF THE PREDICAMENT OF PEASANTS IN NORTH-CENTRAL ETHIOPIA*. Altogether, I have spent at least 15 years in studying the famine in Ethiopia.

### 2. THE SOCIOECONOMIC ORIGIN OF FAMINE

How do we explain the persistent famine in Ethiopia for the last forty-five years under three seemingly different regimes? In spite of their apparent difference all three have one common characteristic: they are all despotic, with no accountability or responsiveness. If we rank the three despotic regimes, the present one will not come out as the best as some believe. In general there are three basic explanations of famine. First, the victims themselves explain away famine as the wrath of God, a punishment for their sins. One cannot argue with that explanation which is beyond the realm of reason. The most widely held explanation of famine is drought. In fact for some people drought and

famine are almost synonymous. Although nothing can be further from the truth, intellectual inertia has enthroned this apology for famine as an explanation. The mere fact that there are many countries in the world, which experience drought but never famine, does not seem even to raise some doubt in the believers of this explanation.

In Ethiopia drought is not the only reason for crop failure. We have too much rainfall, hailstones, armyworms, the erratic monthly distribution of the rainfall, although the total amount may be adequate. These so-called explanations of famine are not better than the peasant explanation, because they are impervious to reason.

The socioeconomic origin of famine, a relatively simple concept based on empirical data has not so far attracted any serious attention. The following is a brief exposition of the socioeconomic origin of famine.

### 3. VULNERABILITY TO FAMINE

- Vulnerability to famine is characteristic of subsistence producers or peasants, and not of commercial farmers.
- Vulnerability to famine is generated by the oppression and exploitation of the peasants by despotic regimes and unfavourable market forces.
- Since the advent of the Marxist-Leninist regime, all Ethiopian peasants have become landless. They have no ownership rights. They have no security of tenure. They are allowed to operate their small plots of land by constantly expressing their loyalty to the regime.
- The average holding of a peasant is one to one and one-half acres of fragmented plots.
- The need of the regime to indoctrinate the peasants necessitates numerous meetings which peasants are forced to attend, thus wasting valuable working time.
- The regime's need to change and increase its army takes away the able-bodied peasants, leaving old men, women and children in the rural areas.
- Every year at the time of harvest extortionists in the form of collectors of taxes, contributions and debts, descend on the peasants forcing them to pay or to go to jail.
- All peasants take their produce to the market at about the same time and become victims of the stubborn law of the market, because prices for their produce fall drastically. In order to meet their cash obligations they are forced to sell more of their produce.
- This systematic extortion does not only preclude any possibility of saving grain or cash, it also reduces the peasants' food intake.
- Immediately after the harvest season, food consumption of peasants begins a downward trend. This may be called the post-harvest hunger (in March, April and May). During the summer months (June, July and August) food consumption reaches its lowest level. This is the period of pre-harvest hunger.
- Both the post-harvest hunger and the pre-harvest hunger are phenomena of normal years. Adverse natural conditions have almost nothing to do with them. There is, therefore, no reason to blame the natural conditions for them.

These are the conditions that create vulnerability to famine. These are the conditions that point to the socioeconomic origin of famine.

#### 4. THE PROCESS OF FAMINE

- What happens if and when the summer rains fail in June, July and August will certainly affect negatively the following harvest.
- If the summer rains fail, the pre-harvest hunger will intensify and continue through what would have been harvest months (September, October and November).
- The collectors of taxes, contributions and debts for fertilizers and seeds will come with their inflexible demands for cash. The fact that peasants have been going through nine months of hunger and the fact that harvests have failed is not their concern.
- Peasants sell whatever they have ---sheep, goats, and cattle---in order to avoid going to prison. This extortion of their assets impoverishes them further.
- At such a time, the normal post-harvest and pre-harvest hunger gradually turns into famine, total lack of food. I define famine as follows:

***Famine is the most negative state of food consumption under which people, unable to replace even the energy they lose in basal metabolism, consume whatever is stored in their bodies; that means they literally consume themselves to death***  
(Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia: 1958-1977*, p.9)

- A crop failure coming after two successive periods of hunger, the post harvest hunger and the pre-harvest hunger, allows hunger to transform into famine. The post-harvest hunger intensifies and expands into famine.
- The failure of the regime to intervene immediately after crop failure, which would be known by September and October, accelerates the process of famine, the slow and painful death of peasants.
- It is five or seven months later, in February, March and April, that famine turns into a mass killer.
- When famine has reached this stage the damage to human life is extremely high. Moreover, it brings about a total disintegration of society and loss of the necessary assets such as oxen.
- After such a devastating famine, it is not possible for surviving peasants to start normal agricultural activities in the following season. So, the famine continues for a second year.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Cruel and persistent exploitation and impoverishment of peasants has been the normal practice of successive despotic regimes. Adverse natural factors simply accelerate the process of famine generated by the despotic regimes. Today, the mere fact that even after crop failure the regime drags its feet to shift the responsibility for its ineptitude to the international community and allows peasants and pastoralists to die of famine is proof that it has no value for human life. It has the means to purchase killing machines for suppressing the people and for engaging in senseless wars, but not for providing relief assistance to impoverished peasants on the verge of certain death.

The fact that Ethiopian young people are obliged to become cannon fodder by the thousands for the land that is not theirs does not bother the members of the Weyyane regime. One landlord party holds about eleven million peasants, or about 55 million persons, hostage. The regime uses the peasants that it continually impoverishes to extract economic assistance. Even if the regime used the assistance properly, there is no way of bringing about development without liberalizing its monopoly on land. Moreover, the miniscule and fragmented peasant holdings can hardly be modernized.

How can such small farms that are getting even smaller as the population increases warrant the various inputs and the modern agricultural instruments? The leaders of the regime have often stated that they have and will continue to have the unwavering support of the peasants in the futile exercise of the fake so-called elections. The unstated policy is to keep the peasants that constitute 85% of the population politically powerless, economically impoverished, and socially backward. A firm grip on the peasants ensures the fake legitimacy to govern the country. Members of the ruling party often get 100% of the votes in the so-called elections.

In 1967, an American agricultural economist, John Fischer, recommended that agricultural production should increase by 4.4%. Then he added: "***This is more than 200% of the rate by which total food production has been increasing in recent years. To achieve such a rate of growth is possible but short of superior effort by Ethiopians improbable.***" Apart from supplying relief assistance since 1959, the United States had created an Agricultural College in Alemaya, eastern Ethiopia, with the faculty from Oklahoma State University. Today, none of the senior and most experienced graduates of this College are to be found in Ethiopia. The present regime in particular has a clear aversion to educated persons. It prefers to start from zero so that nothing will even appear better or greater than itself. The present regime is clearly engaged in a process of destroy and build.

When the suppressed energy of the Ethiopian people is released in true freedom, and when Ethiopia will have a government that is responsive and responsible, there shall not be famine in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's agricultural resources---land, water resources and climatic diversity--- can be made abundantly productive to enable the country to become an important exporter of a variety of agricultural products. I do not have any doubt about that. But as long as the peasants remain powerless and in bondage, and as long as the mismanagement of agricultural resources continues famine will always be a problem for which the international community will be called upon to provide relief assistance.