

Respect Life: A Constant Ethic

Famine in Ethiopia: Opportunity to Act

By STEPHEN J. CALLAHAN

Nearly a year has passed since the tragedy of drought and famine in Ethiopia and throughout most of Africa was widely revealed to the American public through the media. For Catholic Relief Services, an official overseas development and emergency relief agency of the United States Catholic Conference, it was a situation field staffs had warned about as early as autumn 1982.

For many the media exposure served as a shocking introduction to the horrors of a starving continent. The famine in Ethiopia was also a lens through which the wider problem of world hunger could be more clearly viewed. Because of the Ethiopian famine more people realize that hunger and famine in the world are not inevitable realities, and that the tragic loss of life in Ethiopia need not have been.

The right to eat is one of the most critical of human rights today because of the massive number of lives claimed daily by malnutrition. The great irony of the hunger problem is that while the world produces enough grain to provide each man, woman and child on earth with a daily diet of 3,000 calories, more than one billion people are chronically undernourished.

Most experts now agree that tragedies such as that in Africa could be avoided through the depoliticization of food assistance, the creation of an adequate world grain reserve and a more just distribution of the world's food supply on an ongoing basis. Avoiding famine through reform of the world food system, however, will not solve the underlying causes of hunger. Rather, increased commitment to long-term development strategies on the part of all nations — especially the United States — is required, as well as restructuring economic relations which profoundly influence possibilities for economic and social progress for developing nations.

Both the problem of hunger and its solution are complex. The problem poses fundamental moral questions requiring hard decisions in the religious, social, political and economic realms. Solutions are attainable, but will only be achieved through a sustained and patient effort on the part of both the developing and developed nations. With advances in science, travel, management and communications technology, and the corresponding existence of sufficient resources worldwide, came proof of the feasibility of such solutions. All that is lacking is the political will.

Many public figures have noted that true peace in the modern world will only be achieved by attending to the poor, especially the poor in the developing world. As Pope John Paul II said in his homily in Edmonton, Canada in 1984: "The new name for peace is development . . . And the poor people in the poor nations — poor in different ways, not only lacking food but also deprived of freedom in human rights — will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others." All Christians, especially Catholics in the prosperous United States, are called to play a leading role in shaping this peaceful world.

At the height of the Ethiopian famine, more than 10 million lives were unnecessarily threatened with extinction; more than 900,000 people perished. Long before public awareness of the problem, CRS and other private relief agencies were responding. Finally, the United States and other donor nations also recognized the severity of the famine and began to channel more assistance to Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is representative of the complex environmental, social, cultural and political factors that are part of the "stage" on which the tragic hunger drama is typically acted out. Once a prosperous country, Ethiopia today is a nation beset by myriad problems reflected in such glaring statistical indicators as a 15 percent literacy rate, \$117 annual average per capita income, a life expectancy of 38 years and an infant mortality rate of over 150 per 1,000 live births (as compared to a rate of 12 per 1,000 in the U.S.). On top of this, rainfall has been inadequate for over 10 years. The persistence of long-



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standing prejudices further complicate relief efforts and long-range solutions. Ethiopia's problems transcend what any economic system, capitalist or marxist, can hope to resolve quickly.

The drought and famine so publicized in Ethiopia have also affected 29 other Sub-Saharan nations. At the height of the drought, which continues today in many areas of Africa, 150 million of the continent's total population of 450 million people were affected. Current estimates by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization indicate that the continent will continue to be dependent on food imports for the rest of the century, and that this most recent drought has severely affected Africa's long-term ability to feed itself. Africa is the only part of the world that grows less food per capita today than it did 20 years ago. The World Bank estimates that 200 million people, or 45 percent of Africa's population eat fewer calories per day than are, by U.N. standards, necessary for a survival diet.

Africa has experienced drought and consequent famine many times throughout its history. But, while drought is the most visible cause of the recent crisis, other factors have disrupted the continent's food system and acutely aggravated the impoverished conditions there. Inattention to environmental factors, such as desertification due to prolonged overgrazing and deforestation, have contributed greatly to the severity of the crisis. Civil wars and ethnic conflicts, often arising out of the disputes along borders set by Africa's European colonizers, have interfered with agricultural production from the Sub-Saharan Belt to Southern Africa, creating a refugee population currently estimated to be four million people. Efforts to increase food production have been frustrated by ex-

ternal factors, ineffective governments and lack of adequate economic incentives for small- to middle-size producers to work the land.

To prevent future famines, we must understand the present crisis in Africa in the context of chronic economic and agricultural deficiencies.

This drama of hunger, poverty and dependence is not limited to Africa. Consider that:

- More than half the world's population live on incomes of less than \$500 per year.
- 15 to 20 million people die each year — 20 every minute — of hunger-related causes. Three out of every four are children.
- In 83 countries of the world, three percent of the landowners control 80 percent of the land.
- The United States, Western Europe, Japan and Australia consume 70 percent of the world's grains. Most of that is used to feed beef and dairy cattle.
- 36 of the world's poorest countries export crops to North America.
- One-half of one percent of one year's world military expenditures would pay for all the farm equipment needed to increase food production and approach self-sufficiency in food-deficit, low-income countries by 1990.

These facts speak to the irony of widespread hunger and malnutrition in a world of agricultural abundance.

Policy analysts say the hunger problem could be solved. In June of 1980 the Presidential Commission on World Hunger concluded: "Eliminating at least the very worst aspects of hunger by the year 2000 is possible — if the United States and others make it a major policy objective. We have the technical know-how and resources to do so. What we lack is the political will to act upon this commitment with sufficient vigor." New farming technologies and vastly improved transportation and communications networks can help to eliminate starvation and malnutrition.

The systemic causes of world hunger and poverty are the most controversial, yet most fundamental aspects of the problem.

Through its involvement in world systems of trade and finance, the United States exercises a powerful, and at times devastating, role in determining social conditions in developing nations.

In addition to the economic impact of U.S. aid, the principal areas of international concern are international trade, Third World debt, unemployment and foreign private investment. It is often believed that there is little relation between the economics of the developing world and that of the U.S. However, one-eighth of U.S. jobs depend on exports to the Third World and 40 percent of U.S. manufactured goods are consumed by developing nations.

The teaching of the Church is extensive on these matters. Drawing on that teaching, the bishops are writing their pastoral letter on the U.S. economy and how Christian teaching applies to economic questions. In their present draft, the bishops stress the importance of Jesus' "preferential option for the poor" and the belief that our economic relations must be guided by Christian concern for the integrity of all people. More specifically, they note that the emphasis of U.S. international development assistance should be shifted from the narrow East-West strategic debate and consequent emphasis on military aid, to an agenda centered on socio-economic development which will be a constructive force for peace and stability in the world.

Both the problem of hunger and its solution are complex. Solutions are attainable, but will only be achieved through a sustained and patient effort on the part of both the developing and developed nations. Starvation and malnutrition can be eliminated. Personal commitment to action through prayer, sacrifice, almsgiving and political involvement is the key.

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