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The Politics of Famine in Ethiopia

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Despite extensive coverage of the Ethiopian famine in the media, few Americans are aware that the crisis, like earlier famines in Cambodia and Biafra, has its roots in war and politics as well as drought.

The northern provinces of Tigre and Eritrea, which have been worst hit by the famine, have also been embroiled for many years in armed struggles against the central government in Addis Ababa. As many as 3.8 million Tigreans and 2 million Eritreans are in danger of starvation, yet the ongoing civil wars have cut off the vast majority of these victims from aid programs run by the Ethiopian government and the international aid agencies operating under its auspices. "Because of the fighting, very little of the food contributed by the United States and other donor countries is reaching the starving in the rebel-controlled areas," says Dan Connell, a former Reuters correspondent in Ethiopia and now executive director of Grassroots International, a relief agency based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Although Connell is one of the few people involved who will talk about it, it is an open secret among relief workers that more than half the famine victims in Ethiopia are not being reached by the government’s programs. Ethiopia’s ruling military junta, led by Lieut. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, is covering up the fact, and foreign diplomats and relief agency officials have been reluctant to reveal it for fear the government will curtail their operations altogether. Even more disturbing, there is strong evidence that the government has deliberately withheld food from rebel-controlled areas in Eritrea and Tigre in order to starve the insurgents into submission. Thousands of noncombatants there have died from hunger.

Unfortunately, the United States is tacitly abetting this use of famine as a weapon. In an interview last March, Hunter Farnham, a senior official with the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.), said that famine victims in areas not controlled by the Ethiopian government are "really over a barrel in terms of the U.S. being able to help them directly." He added, "I can tell you that we’re quite concerned about this situation, and we’d like to be more responsive to the noncombatants who are really suffering the

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most." Although Farnham implied that the problem is a logistical one, it is political. The Reagan Administration is attempting to woo Ethiopia away from the Soviet Union, so it has been reluctant to provide direct aid to famine victims living in rebel-controlled areas. So far the United States has pledged 210,000 tons of food to Ethiopia, the largest amount of famine relief in our history. But 90 percent of all international assistance to Ethiopia is being channeled to areas under government control and is thus subject to the junta's direction.

Who are the insurgents and why are they fighting? Historically, Ethiopia's forty-odd ethnic groups have been oppressed by the Amhara tribe, which continues to control the central government. Over the past decade, however, a number of armed resistance movements have emerged. The Tigre People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F.), established in 1975, seeks a decentralized popular government to represent equally all the nationalities within Ethiopia.

Although government troops occupy nine major towns in Tigre, the T.P.L.F. holds more than 85 percent of the rural areas. In the villages under its control, the front has organized People's Councils which have implemented land reform, built schools and clinics, and provided agricultural assistance and local security. Because of those tangible benefits, many peasants in rebel-held areas are sympathetic to the front.

Civil conflict has also raged for more than two decades in the Pennsylvania-size territory of Eritrea, which is coveted by otherwise landlocked Ethiopia for its coast along the Red Sea. Ever since Emperor Haile Selassie's annexation of Eritrea in 1962, an independence movement has fought against successive regimes in Addis Ababa, but after twenty-three years the conflict remains stalemated. Today, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.) occupies about 85 percent of the province outside the major cities, and it has established extensive administrative structures in the areas under its control. Although massive government offensives have hurled the rebels back temporarily, the army has failed to occupy the countryside.

After a coup ended Haile Selassie's forty-four-year reign, in September 1974, a Marxist junta known as the Derg ("committee") took power, and following a bloody power struggle, Colonel Mengistu became its supreme leader. Because of the Derg's human rights violations and communist leanings, U.S.-Ethiopian relations became increasingly strained, and in 1977 the Soviet Union replaced the United States as Ethiopia's superpower ally and weapons supplier. Since then, the Russians have provided the Derg an estimated $2.5 billion in sophisticated weaponry (including MI-24 helicopter gunships and MIG-23 fighter-bombers), along with some 1,400 military advisors, and Cuba has supplied 3,000 troops.

Today, nearly half Ethiopia's national budget goes to support a highly mechanized army of 306,000 troops, one of the largest military establishments in sub-Saharan Africa. The civil wars in Eritrea and Tigre are costing the Derg approximately $500,000 a day, according to The New York Times, yet despite the huge investment of blood and treasure, victory has remained elusive.

A series of military setbacks have led the Derg to resort to increasingly brutal forms of warfare, including scorched-earth tactics. In the spring of 1983, the Ethiopian Army launched major offensives in Eritrea and Tigre which left massive destruction in their wake. According to Gayle Smith, a freelance journalist who toured Tigre on foot that year, the Ethiopian government deliberately sought to bring about a famine in the north as a way of weakening the rebels. "The 1983 offensive was launched in western Tigre — the only part of the province where a grain surplus was achieved — and it occurred right after the harvest," Smith says. "You can draw your own conclusions."

Government forces burned grain supplies, fields and pasturage lands using incendiary bombs, cut down fruit orchards, shot domestic animals and destroyed public schools and health clinics built by the T.P.L.F. A similar military offensive in Eritrea contributed to the famine there by disrupting planting in the southwestern part of the territory bordering the Sudan. The Ethiopian Air Force also bombed towns and villages on market days, terrorizing the inhabitants. "It's basically the old strategic-hamlet theory" Grassroots International's Connell says, drawing a parallel to U.S. counterinsurgency methods in Vietnam. "The government used terror attacks and hunger to drive the people out of the countryside and into official reception centers in the main towns, which are held by Ethiopian government forces.
The goal is not so much to control the peasants as to deny aid to the guerrillas.”

Evidence has emerged recently that the Ethiopian government is also diverting emergency food to the army and militia. In October the government-held town of Lalibela was overrun in a T.P.L.F.-led attack. According to three Western relief workers there, the rebels discovered large quantities of international food aid inside a government garrison.

The deteriorating security situation, combined with communications and transportation problems, have meant that large areas of Eritrea and Tigre are cut off from famine-relief efforts. During last spring and summer the key roads to the north were often impassable because of fighting. Only a few food convoys got through, accompanied by armed escorts. Moreover, voluntary agencies working under the auspices of the Ethiopian government’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (R.R.C.) can distribute food only in official centers set up in the vicinity of government-controlled garrison towns, such as Mekele, the capital of Tigre.

“It’s very difficult to reach the rural areas through the regular channels,” admits James Deharpporte of Catholic Relief Services, which is working in Eritrea and Tigre in cooperation with the R.R.C. “The famine and the war situation have caused people to come to the urban areas where we have set up feeding centers, and they are the major beneficiaries.”

The only organizations providing direct aid to famine victims in rural areas of Eritrea and Tigre are two indigenous groups affiliated with the rebels. The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) coordinates its activities with the E.P.L.F. but is administered independently; the association’s officials say they provide food to all people in need regardless of whether they support the guerrillas. So far, ERA has managed an effective but seriously underfinanced relief effort in behalf of the 2 million Eritreans in danger of starvation.

Similarly, the Relief Society of Tigre (REST), a voluntary agency founded in 1978, is the only humanitarian organization operating in the guerrilla-controlled areas there. REST’s administration and personnel are separate from the T.P.L.F.’s, although REST officials cooperate with the front and with the People’s Councils in the villages.

According to Gayle Smith, ERA and REST “are so efficient that they could be models for disaster relief anywhere in the world.” The bulk of the food and supplies they allot is contributed by European church organizations and a handful of U.S. private voluntary agencies working through the Sudan, including Grassroots International, Lutheran World Relief (New York City), Mercy Corps International (Portland, Oregon), Direct Relief International (Sacramento, California), the Mennonite Central Committee (Akron, Pennsylvania) and, since November, Oxfam America (Boston).

The U.S. government provides small amounts of indirect aid to ERA and REST through those private relief groups and the International Committee of the Red Cross. But although the Ethiopian government reaches about half of the famine victims, and ERA and REST the other half, the rebel-associated groups have far less food at their disposal. “International aid is running 20-to-1 in favor of the government,” Smith says. Many donors have declined to work with ERA and REST for fear either that the Ethiopian government might restrict the donors’ programs or that food given to the agencies might end up feeding rebel soldiers. So far, however, there is no evidence that food aid from ERA or REST has been diverted to the fronts.

Because the amounts of food and supplies reaching the two organizations have been so small, famine victims in remote villages of Eritrea and Tigre must travel to feeding centers in the government-controlled towns. Those who survive the journey are often badly treated, according to Chris Cartter, associate director of Grassroots International, who toured the T.P.L.F.-controlled areas of Tigre in November and interviewed a number of migrating famine victims. He heard accounts of intimidation, harassment and even physical violence suffered at the hands of Ethiopian officials.

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"Several refugees told me that officials in the government feeding centers asked them for an I.D. card, such as membership in a farmers' union," he says. "Because people from the T.P.L.F.-controlled areas don't have I.D.s, they were told to go to the back of the line or to come back the next day. Some were denied food and even beaten."

Another source of the refugees' fear and mistrust of the official famine-relief program is a new government policy. In November, the Derg began implementing what it called "a long-term solution" to the famine, which consists of resettling peasants from Eritrea and Tigre to areas that are supposedly more fertile in the southern provinces of Welega and Illubabor. More than 70,000 people from Tigre have been moved to the south in trucks, buses and Soviet Antonov transport aircraft, and the Ethiopian government plans to resettle a total of 1.5 million people there by the end of the year. In many cases, peasants have been removed from their ancestral lands against their will. According to a recent report in The Christian Science Monitor, villages in Tigre have been surrounded by troops at night and their inhabitants herded into trucks which take them to the new settlements.

Mistreatment in the feeding centers and forced resettlement policies, together with ERA and REST's inability to provide enough food, have led to a massive exodus from the rebel-held areas. Carter reports that starving peasants are leaving their villages at a rate of 10,000 a week for the refugee camps across the Sudanese border. New arrivals at the border number around 120,000, and some 60,000 migrants are making their way through Western Tigre. Although REST has set up dozens of checkpoints along the route to provide the refugees with food, water and basic medical care, thousands have died.

Meanwhile, the fighting has intensified in Eritrea and Tigre. Carter, who witnessed a fire fight between rebels and government forces near the Tigrean town of Aresa in late November, notes that 50,000 troops have been added to the Ethiopian Army as a result of the junta's new policy of conscription. According to the vice chairman of the T.P.L.F., the front expects a major government offensive in the near future and views the Derg's resettlement plan as part of a strategy to depopulate Eritrea and Tigre so as to further weaken the insurgents.

On December 3, Ethiopian government aircraft strafed the Tigrean town of Shellalo, killing eighteen people and wounding fifty-six. "Shellalo lies on the road to Kassa La, the principal migration route out of Tigre and the only food lifeline into the province," Carter says. "If the Ethiopian government seals off the road to Kassa La, it will mean certain death for hundreds of thousands of people within weeks."

Officially, the United States allocates food aid according to need, regardless of the political orientation of the recipient country. "A hungry child knows no politics," A.I.D. administrator M. Peter McPherson said recently. But critics contend that U.S. emergency food aid has in fact been heavily influenced by political considerations, with disproportionate amounts of aid going to countries that are either of strategic value to the United States or that align themselves with U.S. interests.

Because of Ethiopia's strategic location on the Horn of Africa, within striking distance of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, it has long been a focus of geopolitical rivalry between the superpowers. Under Haile Selassie, the United States had access to the Eritrean Red Sea coast and maintained an important electronic listening post at Kagnew Communications Station in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Thus, ever since the Carter Administration "lost" Ethiopia to the Russians, the U.S. government has sought by various means to lure the Derg back into the Western camp. Now the Reagan Administration is employing emergency relief as a carrot and stick to achieve its foreign-policy objectives.

The Soviet Union has established a naval anchorage on Eritrea's Dahlak Archipelago and is reportedly installing a missile facility in the area. Those moves have aroused concern in Washington about a new strategic threat on the Horn. The famine has also strengthened the Ethiopian government's military position vis-a-vis the insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigre, possibly opening the way for conquest of the rebel-held territories. Such a development would represent a major strategic advance for the Soviet Union.

Although the Administration began sending emergency food aid to Ethiopia in 1983, the quantities were inadequate to the magnitude of the famine. Not until October 23, when a graphic BBC film of the famine was broadcast on the NBC Nightly News, was the American public alerted to the vast human tragedy under way. The shocking images of suffering and death triggered an outpouring of public concern and forced the Reagan Administration to expand its aid program sharply. Yet a plea for increased aid had been made by R.R.C. commissioner Dawit Wolde Giorgis in March, six months earlier. Those months of delay contributed to an untold number of deaths.

The Rev. Charles Elliot, a British relief official, recently charged that the United States and Britain had intentionally delayed large-scale relief assistance to Ethiopia in the belief that widespread famine would trigger the overthrow of the Derg and bring a pro-Western regime to power. (Indeed, a major cause of the coup that ousted Haile Selassie was the Emperor's cover-up of the severe famine of 1972-73 in which more than 200,000 people died. Apparently he had felt that a request for emergency relief would tarnish his international prestige.) But the current famine has had the opposite effect, helping Mengistu tighten his grip on power and strengthening his ideological ties with Moscow. On September 12, the Derg celebrated its tenth anniversary with a $100 million gala and announced the formation of an official state Communist Party.

Despite the strength of Ethiopian-Soviet ties, U.S. policy-makers believe that Ethiopia — like Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia — can be induced by large amounts of Western aid to change its political orientation. They contend that the expanded relief effort represents "a threat to Soviet hegemony over Ethiopia," Time reported in its November 26 issue.

On November 2, the Administration announced that instead of channeling all famine aid through third parties such as voluntary organizations and U.N. agencies, it would send it directly to the Ethiopian R.R.C. The Reagan Administration also launched a propaganda offensive. A.I.D. administer McPherson compared the United
Entire villages congregate under trees during the day to prepare food out of sight of MIG fighter planes. The United States' generosity with the Soviet Union's meager shipments of food aid and "callous indifference" to the plight of its ally, McPherson's righteous indignation might have been more appropriate if the United States had been less tardy and more balanced in its response to the crisis. In any event, it was a transparent gesture of salesmanship.

Because of the Administration's desire to improve relations with the Derg and eventually to displace the Russians, it has been reluctant to provide large amounts of aid to ERA and REST or to condemn the Derg's ruthless military tactics against rebel-held areas of Eritrea and Tigre. The United States has little incentive to support the movements for self-determination there, since the geopolitical prize it covets is a united Ethiopian Empire with its Eritrean coast intact; a dismembered weakened Ethiopia would be of little strategic value to either superpower.

To date, Ethiopia has shown few signs of responding to America's courtship. Last month R.R.C. commissioner Giorgis attacked the United States for its belated response to the famine. His remarks drew an angry retort from McPherson, who termed the accusation "a classic example of biting the hand that feeds you." The Reagan Administration may now be hedging its bets—continuing to provide limited aid to ERA and REST in order to apply pressure on the Derg.

Another important variable in the complex political equation is the stability of the Sudan, America's closest ally in the Horn. The regime of President Mohammed Gaafar el-Nimeiry is shaky, and the country is beset by severe drought, a renewed civil war in the south, severe tensions with Ethiopia and the burden of some 700,000 refugees. The influx of an additional 500,000 to 1 million refugees from Eritrea and Tigre could well destabilize the Sudan, creating another opening for Soviet gains in the region. If the United States wishes to stem the massive exodus from Ethiopia, it must provide more food aid to Eritrea and Tigre.

Geopolitical considerations aside, as a first step toward alleviating the enormous human suffering in the two rebel-controlled provinces, all donor governments should send more aid to ERA and REST. "I would never tell the U.S. not to give famine assistance to the Ethiopian government," says Dan Connell, "But if it's really humanitarian aid, you have to work where the victims are, and that includes rebel-controlled areas." Most urgently needed are trucks to deliver food that has already arrived. REST has forty trucks, with which it can transport only 1,000 tons of food a month; in order to meet the need, hundreds more are required.

Even with increased relief, however, the suffering in Eritrea and Tigre cannot be dealt with until the fighting stops. One million people in central Tigre are so weak from hunger that they are unable to migrate to the Sudan. They have sold their seeds, tools and oxen, and have no means of production. Unless relief aid can reach them, most will die.

Several aid agencies have proposed an internationally supervised cease-fire that would permit large shipments of grain, medicine and relief supplies across political and military boundaries, including emergency airlifts of food and supplies into the rebel-held zones. Although guerrilla leaders in both territories have offered to negotiate a cease-fire, the Ethiopian government has refused. R.R.C. commissioner Giorgis told The Washington Post recently, "Ethiopia will never...make a deal with terrorists and secessionists."

Thus it will take an international outcry to pressure the Derg to permit aid to reach the forgotten people of Eritrea and Tigre. "The Ethiopian famine has become caught up in global politics and can only be solved at that level," Carter says. "If something is not done soon, a lot of people will have blood on their hands."

Jonathan Tucker is a Boston-based journalist. This article was reprinted with permission from The Nation.

JOB OPENING AT RESIST

We're looking for a full-time office manager/coordinator who will coordinate our grants program, help write and edit the newsletter and assist in developing fundraising efforts. Requirements include demonstrated experience working with grassroots organizations, proven communications and writing skills, as well as typing ability, familiarity with bookkeeping and, of course, a strong commitment to anti-racist, feminist and anti-militarist politics.

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Witnessing the Famine:
An Interview with Chris Cartier of Grassroots International

In November of 1984, Chris Cartier, an associate director of Grassroots International, a Boston-based relief agency, toured the rebel-controlled provinces of Tigray and Eritrea, the areas most affected by the current famine. Leading a Boston Globe reporter and photographer and an NBC-TV crew, Cartier and his entourage were the first westerners to witness and document the massive famine in these areas. The following excerpts, taken from an interview with Cartier conducted by Meredith Smith and Ken Tangvik of the Resist staff, is meant to complement the article presented in this issue on 'The Politics of Famine in Ethiopia', which should be read first.

Grassroots International has received grants from Resist in the past for its educational projects. For more information contact Grassroots International, Box 312, Cambridge, MA 02139.

Before going into Eritrea and Tigray I had heard from the Sudanese that people were crossing the border at the rate of 500 per day. But the Sudanese heard in reports from Tigray that there were going to be one quarter to one half million new refugees within a few months. The figures didn't make sense because the flow of refugees at the time was not nearly that great. When I left on the trip, though, the story of the famine was breaking so fast that even the Tigrayans I talked to in Khartoum and in Kassala, couldn't explain to me what I was going to see because they didn't know it themselves.

Western Tigray has long been the bread basket of the entire northern region of Ethiopia — a very strategic area. In fact, the Ethiopian government, over the years, has transformed some of the food production into export crops. The TPLF which now controls most of this region, has instituted land reforms and developed very good relations with the small and medium-sized farmers in the area. Even though it has been hit by drought, there is still a surplus of food here. Tigray has historically been an area that people have migrated to during hard times. The drought has been going on for a number of years and over the past few years there has been a migration into western Tigray. Last year alone 200,000 people migrated and were resettled in the area. In the middle of last year they met their saturation point and began to send people into Sudan.

Last summer things began to explode. In mid August (1984) REST realized what was coming. There were massive crop failures, 95% in eastern Tigray and 90% in central Tigray due to drought and also infestation of what they call army worms. There were 60% losses in western Tigray. REST sent out people to all the corners of Tigray to do a quick survey. In September they came out with a policy which they implemented on the 1st of October. They pulled back and consolidated their relief efforts to western Tigray because they had so little food to distribute and they stopped moving food into central Tigray which had previously been a component of their activities. At that point, people were given two choices: to go into a government-controlled town for food, or if they couldn't get food in a government town, or didn't want to, REST would manage their migration to Sudan where hopefully, by the grace of God and Allah, the world international community would take care of them (this happened in mid-October which was when the world attention focused on the situation).

The situation in the government towns is not good. Migrants are coming out of the rural areas. They are crossing the battle lines, the political and military lines, in search of food. I interviewed as many of the migrants as I could in this region to try to piece together what had happened to them. Clearly, thousands of people have crossed into the cities and have gotten food. People are getting fed but there's not enough food in these towns to feed all the people that are there.
Some people are being asked to produce farmers association cards. Farmers associations are Ethiopian government institutions so, of course, the people from Tigray didn't have them. The argument of the government and many relief workers is that identification is needed to avoid double counting. That, in part, is true, but it's also an obvious tactic, which we saw in Vietnam — to figure out what side of the conflict people are on. And several things happen once that determination is made. People got food, but there was generally harassment and delays. People got sent to the back of the line or told over and over to come back the next day. If a single man walked up they would ask him where his family was, where were his kids. They would tell him to bring his sons the next day, and that they wanted to see his sons before they gave him any food. In some instances, people were beaten by government authorities.

The first wave of people in early October went into the cities taking their chances. A lot of them got food. Those who didn't or who were harassed went back to their villages and told the others that it was hopeless. Whole villages that were two or three hours from the nearest town packed up and walked four to eight weeks to Sudan. Many of them died along the way.

There is also a resettlement program which is now fully under way. The Ethiopian government is airlifting people out of the principal towns of Makele, Bati, Koreni and others, using Soviet carriers and helicopters, to take them to southwestern Ethiopia. Their stated goal is to resettle a million Tigrayans to areas they feel are more fertile. Even people who may have thought about going into town for food didn't because they knew that many of their relatives and friends were being resettled against their will. Many of these people refused to go anywhere near the cities, risking death to move to Sudan.

The rate of migration is unbelievable. There are two principal routes. They all converge in western Tigray. The total number of people moving into western Tigray as of early December was 5,000 every day.

On my trip into Tigray we left from Kassala, on the border with Sudan, in a food convoy of ten ten-ton Fiat trucks. We moved at night because of the threat of aerial bombardment by the Ethiopian military. We crossed over the border into Eritrea and then cut south to the road across the desert. Generally we traveled without mishap on the trip I was on, though there were several MIGs that flew overhead one day. And the convoy ahead of us had a skirmish with the "shifta" or bandits who are armed by the Ethiopians.

The trip into Tigray was extraordinarily gruelling. The trucks run about ten kilometers an hour over roads which barely exist through desert and hills. Each convoy includes about 10-15 trucks and is guarded by about 50 fighters.

During the day we would sit camouflaged under trees, sleeping, shooing away the flies and talking to people. The fighters would cook food and take good care of the others on the convoy. The fighters are also mobilized to respond to any disaster. At one point during the trip the truck ahead of me, the lead truck carrying 25 fighters, stopped. It was late in the evening, just getting dark, and there was something rustling off to the right. There was a lot of thorn brush so we couldn't see very far. All the fighters except one, dove off the truck with their guns and ran in the direction of the noise. The woman fighter, who was left on top of the truck, hauled out a huge machine gun, an automatic weapon. It all happened instantly. The rustling turned out to be a shepherd with a flock of goats, so there was no mishap.

You tend to forget that you are in the middle of a war zone and that attacks happen constantly throughout the region. And everywhere there was this intense sense of comradeship, everyone working together, everyone rallying around what their lives meant at that point — which was saving their people.

The first night in southwest Eritrea, we saw maybe 800 people walking in a group, villagers who had come from eastern and central Tigray and had walked many, many weeks to get to this point, many of them dying along the way. The next night a slightly larger group of about 1,000 passed us by. These were people in a very desperate situation. They were having to make a very agonizing decision about whether or not to abandon forty stragglers who had been slowing down the whole group.

Every day as we got further and further into Tigray, the horror got worse. Every day there would be more and
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more people; hundreds of thousands of people who were barely alive; people who were dressed in rags. Many of the kids were naked. It's cold there at night; it dropped down into the forties at night and people didn't have any blankets or shelter. When people are already so weak, the temperature can really take its toll.

Leaving Eritrea, we dropped down into western Tigray where REST has focused much of its relief activities. They've set up forty check points. At each point they supply food, water and medical services to the best of their ability. The idea is to keep people taken care of during the day so they can walk that night to the next check point. They are in the process solely of managing the migration and exodus of their own people out of the country.

At one check point, Zela Zele, that I visited when we first got to western Tigray, there were 10,000 people. The area was rolling arid hills with thorn brush and patchy trees. Walking a couple of miles around, I saw thousands and thousands of people in the dried up stream beds. People were cooking and sleeping and scratching wells in the stream beds. The water at that point was about two or three feet down. REST supplies food and medical care to all these people in a very organized fashion. They operate wells and clinics at all the check points.

I was surprised at how calm and organized the operation was when I first got into western Tigray. The level of organization was incredible and there wasn't any chaotic activity. There wasn't any clamoring after and fighting for places in trucks. All the empty grain trucks ran out with 75 people on each one of them. They tried to screen all the sickest people and put them on a truck for a ride out.

Because the rate of migration was increasing rapidly, REST had gone beyond its own capacity to feed people in this area. They could feed about 50,000 to 80,000 at one time. That's about where they were at the time I was there, but the migration was starting to outpace their relief effort. On the way out I saw the effect of that.

The organization started to break down, and the calm also. Even though people were desperate, it wasn't out of control until we started going out. We were already one day out and all the trucks were filled with people. We spent one night at one of the transit camps where there were about 7,000 people. The decision was made to take some of the healthier people out of the trucks to make room for some of the very sick people who were in the camp. So basically there was a new seating arrangement. The scene in the dusk was just maddening. People were clawing to get into those trucks. Kids were crying, mother were crying and tossing their kids onto the trucks. Old men were trying to climb on the back. As we drove off, I'll never forget this, some guy was carrying his kid and flung himself and his kid in front of the truck. We barely stopped in time. He was that desperate, knowing a ride on a truck meant a ticket out to what he thought was a prosperous situation in the Sudan.

However, the situation in the Sudan is very grim. When I visited Zela Zele on the way out, there were 15,000 people where five days earlier there had been 10,000. Crossing the border on the way back into Sudan, migrants were arriving at 1,200 per day, double the number of a few days earlier.

No one disputes that the famine is the worst in Tigray and in southern Eritrea. There's a very serious area in the south called Sidamo and some in the Ogaden, but the bulk of the people at risk are in the areas of conflict. Once you understand something about the war and how destructive it's been, it's not surprising to see that the famine is the worst there. I think we'll see a half million people arrive in the Sudan in the next few months. I think we'll see over a half million dead in Tigray alone.

There's been heavy ground fighting in the region. This is the time of year for offensives. Both the EPLF and the TPLF fear that an offensive will soon be mounted by the government. The most worrisome thing that's happened recently was on December 11th when there was a bombing and strafing of drought victims who were migrating to Sudan through a town called Shillalo in Eritrea. Eighteen people were wounded and 56 killed. Those reports have been corroborated by survivors who are now in camps in Sudan and have been interviewed by the media. At the time of the bombing, the press viewed it as just another bombing, of which there are many. The significance of it was that it took place in Shillalo in Eritrea which lies on the principal migration route out and the only lifeline into this region.

There are also Ethiopian ground forces in the area that could seal off the region. That would mean certain death to hundreds of thousands of people within weeks. None of the food would be able to get in and the people would be trapped. These people are living day to day and if REST misses one convoy, there's no food. If they miss one convoy, people will starve, thousands of people will starve. There's a convoy going in every three days and if one of them is blown up or delayed, even for a few days, it will be translated into lost lives. So the stakes are very high, they are very high.

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