

# The Politics of Starvation - May 1986

How can you believe in a God of love and yet at the same time witness the misery of famine in Africa?' For years Christians have been on the defensive when faced with this kind of argument. Yet the truth is that famine is not a natural disaster — it is man-made. People in danger of exposure point accusingly away from themselves. Instead of accepting their accusations, It Is time for Christians to stand up and declare, without apology, that wars, famines and disease are not from God. The tragic famine currently sweeping through Africa could have been avoided. There are several factors attributable to man that are perpetuating it:

## 1. Western Capitalism

Comfortable conservatives may not wish to face up to it, but a great deal of the African misery is caused by companies pandering to the luxury wants of western society. In search of big profits they have persuaded rural Africans to replace basic livelihood crops with so-called 'cash crops' What was once pastoral grazing land used by nomadic tribes is now exploited for cash crop production. This has left these tribes people much more vulnerable to famine in their natural habitats. Out-of-season luxury vegetables are produced for European consumption. Much existing vegetation is uprooted, reducing the amount of arable land in agricultural areas. This results in soil erosion and helps the desert to continue its advance. There seems to be no end in sight to this practice since African leaders are encouraging cash crop production in order to secure the foreign currency necessary to bolster national treasuries and finance their military machines.

## 2. War

One example of the disruption of war is seen in Ethiopia where the government currently allocates 46 per cent of its entire budget for military needs. Millions of people have been displaced by the war that has gone on for years. More recently, during international efforts to alleviate suffering in Tigre and Eritrea, the relief agencies have been hampered by resettlement programmes. The Ethiopian government insists on moving people out of their home areas at a time when scarce transportation is needed to take food to famine-affected areas. This is being done as part of a strategy for breaking the strength of the Eritrean fighters. But at what cost!

## 3. Tribalism

Figuring large in these military conflicts is tribalism. Past colonial governments often drew national boundaries without taking into account tribal groupings. In many cases half a tribe has been separated from the other. In others, tribes with longstanding historical conflicts have been enclosed within the boundaries of a single nation. There has never been any real joining by language, culture, religion or history. These complex problems make it difficult to weld a nation together. Witness Angola, Uganda and, more recently, Zimbabwe. Failure to

understand this problem can give rise to insensitive political policies and appointments — and the result spells disaster.

#### **4. International Debt**

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania has said: 'Africa's debt burden is now intolerable. We cannot pay. You know it and all our creditors know it. It is not a rhetorical question when I ask: 'Should we really let our people starve so that we can pay our debts?' Through its massive borrowing from world banks, Africa has again become a slave continent. Its debt has grown faster than any other in the third world. Today, its medium- and long-term debt stands at more than £60 billion. African countries may gain political independence, but as long as they are economically bound they will serve the interests of their economic masters.

#### **5. Self Interest**

Isn't it ironic that so often the first people to die in a famine are the producers of food? Of the millions who have perished in Ethiopia, why have there been so few recorded deaths of starvation in the capital, Addis Ababa? It is always the poor who suffer most. Those who have the political control and purchasing power syphon off what they want for their own welfare and self interest. 'The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern' (Proverbs 29:7).

#### **6. Political Greed**

Anyone who has followed the military takeovers in Africa, or the third world dictatorships of South America and Asia, is aware of the criminality involved in leadership. To quote the Economist 'Almost everybody who takes power finds it habit forming; none more so than the politician who believes he will lose his fortune, and maybe his life, if he leaves office. This is why it is usually advisable for aspiring rulers to let a dictator be peaceably reunited with his Swiss bank account instead of put in jail or shot.' How do we as Christians respond to all this? Should we dissociate ourselves from assisting such countries because of the corruption? Do we refuse to give help to the poor out of fear that someone will misuse the funds? The Word of God is abundantly clear: 'If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered' (Proverbs 21:13). God is committed to the cause of those who are poor through no fault of their own. And he is fully prepared to act on their behalf. 'Do not exploit the poor because they are poor, and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them' (Proverbs 22:22, 23). Some day King Jesus will return to rule this earth in righteousness and justice. Then all those who have oppressed the poor for their selfish ends will face the God they have ignored. World leaders need to heed the Word of God if they are to find economic and political stability in their countries: 'If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure' (Proverbs 29:14); 'By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it

down' (v4). As Christians we shouldn't allow people to get away with blaming God for the tragedies of our time. Man is the victim of his own inhumanity. Man has become his own destroyer.

Meanwhile, It is for us as God's people to demonstrate our response to the needs of the world's suffering through such projects as World Vision, Tear Fund and the more recently formed Help Africa, details of which are given in Newsfront<sup>1</sup>. Help Africa is one of the ways we have committed ourselves to redressing the injustices of our time.