

THE FACES OF ETHIOPIA

The fanatic and the famine

● Behind the new pleas to the West for aid lies a terrible dilemma. The country is controlled by a military dictator who spends three-quarters of the national budget on supporting the biggest army in Africa. His marxist policies have undoubtedly contributed to the disaster. Yet in its desire to aid the starving, the West helps keep Colonel Mengistu, and his regime, in power, report MARY-ANNE FITZGERALD and WILL ELLSWORTH JONES

WHEN Bob Geldof leaves for the famine fields of Ethiopia tomorrow he will be asking the question that must be in the minds of many: after all the money that was given last time, after all the personnel and equipment that was poured into Ethiopia, why is this happening again?

Despite all the efforts of Band Aid and other charities in 1985, the facts are yet again relentlessly depressing. Another drought in northern Ethiopia has brought 5m peasants to the brink of starvation. An aid worker in Tigray province, where there is now less than two weeks of emergency food, says that if aircraft do not arrive carrying food soon "they might just as well carry picks and shovels to bury the dead".

But with the West again being asked to provide funds, there is a danger of "aid fatigue". One official with UNICEF, the United Nations Children's fund, has already expressed fear that Ethiopia might be regarded as an irritating beggar coming back for more and more.

There is no question that the Ethiopians need the West's help and need it immediately. But this time another question is being asked: is Ethiopia's misery to be blamed on nature or man? How much of the horror can be laid at the feet of its leader, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam?

Defector from the government have no doubt about where the fault lies. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, former head of Ethiopia's relief agency, accuses the regime of policies that "have caused hundreds of thousands to die and brought unprecedent suffering to the entire population".

The government, he says, spends its time, energy and money on two things:

ideology and fighting nine separate guerrilla groups in the countryside.

AT TIMES it is difficult to think of Ethiopia as a starving country desperately in need of aid. It has the trappings of wealth and power. Africa's biggest standing army, one of the largest commercial airlines on the continent with a wide network and new Boeing airliners worth hundreds of millions bought or on order; even Ethiopia's airforce rivals any in Africa, with more than 150 MIG fighters.

In September, the streets of Addis Ababa were awash in bright bunting and neon advertisements praising the regime. Citizens were treated to an impressive parade of Russian-supplied tanks, rockets and missiles celebrating the latest political milestone in Ethiopia — the military government of Colonel Mengistu had become the civilian government of President Mengistu.

The president pointedly refused to use the celebration as a platform to publicise the famine, and a donors' meeting to discuss food pledges was postponed because it was thought that the resulting publicity would mar the celebrations.

Last month Mengistu and the six highest ranking members of the government went on a world tour to sell their Peoples' Republic to the highest ranking destinations — the ministers split up and chose different destinations — had the time and inclination to ask for famine assistance.

It was as if the snaking caravans of starving people that are now trekking across parched desert to choked but near-empty food centres do not exist. Mengistu went to his army's paymaster, Moscow, "looking for arms like a thirsty man looks for



Derek Hudson

water". In this supposedly marxist country the West, Mengistu's ideological enemy, supplies 90% of the emergency aid while Moscow supplies the guns. In the past the communist countries did not even bother to attend aid-donor conferences in Addis.

Charity from his Russian allies comes in the form of \$4 billion credit for military equipment, backed by 4,000 Cuban and 1,750 Russian "military advisers".

The Ethiopian army, as The Sunday Times reported last week, press-gangs young men into its service and now numbers 300,000. The cost consumes an estimated three-quarters of the national budget.

Mengistu makes no secret of his contempt for the West's generosity. When Britain sent RAF Hercules aircraft during the last famine, he was furious. "Is this a raid by Nato forces?" he asked. By then, however, the pressure of international opinion was such that he could not send them back.

This time Ethiopia is not objecting to the arrival of four Hercules aircraft, for it



allows it to use its own aircraft to fight a war rather than to fight the famine.

The Ethiopian government has more than enough aircraft of its own: 17 Russian Antonov transport planes capable of performing similar tasks to the Hercules — albeit less efficiently — plus 10 Dakotas, a sprinkling of smaller planes and 40 useful helicopters.

What the famine relief operation gets is just three Antonovs and five helicopters. At least the Antonovs are now actually flying food, which is an improvement on the last famine, when they simply sat on the runway.

But it is not much of an improvement. Even in areas where the army is not directly involved in putting down insurrection, the Mengistu regime hardly appears to be eager to help. There is an admitted need for an extra 350 lorries to move relief supplies. Agencies have agreed to give Ethiopia the lorries if Mengistu will move some of his own vehicles from the south to the north where they are needed. So far the lorries have not moved.

It has long been suggested that Mengistu finds famine a rather more effective weapon than his army in defeating the rebels in Tigray and Eritrea. The rebels are not above using food as a weapon either. Last month they attacked a convoy of 23 lorries, destroying enough wheat to

feed 45,000 people for a month. They say they are happy to allow UN convoys trouble-free access to those who need feeding, but this is disingenuous because they also say that the relief convoys have to warn them in advance, and to do that is to get precisely the official recognition that the UN cannot give.

Any suggestion that a ceasefire with the rebels negotiated is condemned by Mengistu as counter-revolutionary and part of an imperialist plot.

MENGIISTU is not a man who accepts reality; he imposes his own version of it. Known by his detractors as "kitchen boy", he is said to be the illegitimate son of a servant who worked in the palace of the late Emperor Haile Selassie.

The most common story in Addis about him tells of when he was telephoned by kidnapers who said they were holding his wife and children and would shoot them unless he gave up power. "Shoot them," he said and promptly hung up.

He was merely the vice-chairman of the military committee ruling the country after Selassie, when he literally shot his way to the top in a gun battle which left eight officers dead, including the chairman of the council. He followed this with a grim campaign of terror that left hundreds of civilian opponents dead in the street.

Even now, when his need

for such tactics has passed, prisoners in Ethiopian jails are tortured, a favourite device being to hang victims upside down between two tables to have the soles of their feet beaten.

Mengistu inherited famine from Selassie, who had in turn inherited it from the emperors before him. Famine and Ethiopia go hand in hand, it is not a new problem, but under Mengistu the misery has increased.

In Selassie's day the peasant found himself giv-

ing 50% of his crops to the landlord. Come the revolution this was soon replaced by a quota: the peasant had to sell his quota at an artificially low price to the government. One researcher tells of a peasant who had to sell some animals to buy enough grain to sell to the government at a loss. The incentive to grow more was non-existent and the escape route, picking crops for other farmers for cash, was banned.

The problem is compounded by another example of socialist farm planning. Mengistu's government is attempting to "villagise" its peasants — to get them out of their traditional homes by their fields into neat, orderly villages where in theory it will be easier to provide with services and in

practise it is certainly easier to control them.

In all, the government claims that it has moved 8m people in this programme and hopes to move 20m. It is a staggering measure of what Mengistu can achieve when he feels something is important.

A resettlement programme in recent years has moved at least 600,000 people from infertile land in the northern highlands to the south and is now beginning again — the first 400 were moved last week.

In theory they are supposed to be volunteers, but the village co-operatives have to meet quotas of "volunteers". Few dispute the need for peasants to be moved from hopelessly infertile land, but these volunteers have been jailed or executed if they refuse.

"There comes a point when Ethiopia has to face up to the shortcomings of its agricultural policies. The government has its plan and it ploughs on regardless of what anyone may tell it. It's impressive, but it's horrifying, absolutely horrifying," says Christopher Clapham, a specialist on Ethiopia.

Defenders of Mengistu point to the fact that while the West has given a great deal of disaster aid, the development aid which is the key to breaking the cycle of famine is simply not forthcoming. While Ethiopia gets \$16.8 per head in development aid, Somalia, for example, gets \$0.5 and the Sudan \$5.1.

For the past three years a very fat carrot worth \$400m has been dangled in front of Mengistu by Western agencies, the aid to be injected into improving the country's agriculture. But the conditions that go with the money — gearing farming to a more Western-style economy — have been too much for Mengistu to accept, so the aid has been withheld.

There have been recent signs that he may change his mind, but at present the aid "would be a waste of money", argues a Western aid official.

But it is clear that emergency aid is needed from the West and it is needed now. The Disaster's Emergency Committee has already asked for donations to be sent to PO Box 999, London EC2R 1ET.

Yet Ethiopia's own resources of manpower, transportation and revenue are depleted by Mengistu not to mention his paramount responsibility, to feed the people he governs, but to keep himself in power. Meanwhile the West is left providing Band Aids to cope with a cancer.

● Mengistu makes no secret of his contempt for the West's aid, as the pictures of famine once more come out of his country

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