Ethiopia

Refugees, Drought, and Famine

In Ethiopia, a predominantly rural society, the life of peasants is rooted in the land, from which they eke out a meager existence. Through the ages, they have faced frequent natural disasters, armed conflict, and political repression, and in the process they have suffered hunger, societal disruption, and death.

Periodic crop failures and losses of livestock often occur when seasonal rains fail or when unusually heavy storms cause widespread flooding. Pastoral nomads, who move seasonally in search of water and grazing, often are trapped when drought inhibits rejuvenation of the denuded grasslands, which their overgrazing produces. During such times, a family's emergency food supplies diminish rapidly, and hunger and starvation become commonplace until weather conditions improve and livestock herds are subsequently rejuvenated. For centuries, this has been the general pattern of life for most Ethiopian peasants; the insurgent movements in Eritrea, Tigray, and the Ogaden have only served to exacerbate the effects of these natural calamities.

A drought that began in 1969 continued as dry weather brought disaster to the Sahel and swept eastward through the Horn of Africa. By 1973 the attendant famine had threatened the lives of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian nomads, who had to leave their home grounds and struggle into Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Sudan, seeking relief from starvation. By the end of 1973, famine had claimed the lives of about 300,000 peasants of Tigray and Welo, and thousands more had sought relief in Ethiopian towns and villages.

After assuming power in 1974, the military regime embarked on a program to improve the condition of peasants, but famine and hunger continued despite this effort, which was supplemented by substantial foreign assistance. Moreover, the escalation of the military campaign against the insurgent movements in Eritrea, Tigray, and the Ogaden forced thousands of Ethiopians to flee into neighboring countries.

The 1977-78 Ogaden War and the 1978 drought in eastern Ethiopia forced large numbers of people across the southeastern frontier into Somalia. After the defeat of Somali forces in the Ogaden, the government launched a counteroffensive against Eritrean guerrillas, and several hundred thousand Ethiopians sought refuge in Sudan. Meanwhile, in the Ogaden, international relief agencies estimated the number of refugees entering Somali refugee camps at more than 1,000 a day. Most were women and children, and many suffered from dehydration, malnutrition, and diseases such as dysentery, malaria, and tuberculosis. There were more than 700,000 reported refugees scattered in twenty-six makeshift camps, where the absence of sanitation and inadequate medical assistance were compounding the misery created by the food shortages.

By mid-1980 most observers considered the refugee crisis in the Horn of Africa to be the world's worst. During the 1980s, the crisis intensified, as 2.5 million people in the region abandoned their homes and sought asylum in neighboring countries. Although
drought, famine, government repression, and conflict with insurgents were the principal causes of large-scale refugee migrations, other factors such as resettlement and villagization in Ethiopia and conflicts in southern Sudan and northern Somalia also generated refugees. Sudan's war against the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forced many Sudanese into Ethiopia. In northern Somalia, the Somali National Movement (SNM) had been fighting Somali government forces, and in the process hundreds of thousands of Somali fled into Ethiopia.

Several factors were responsible for the refugee crisis in Ethiopia. The repressive Mengistu regime was ruthless in its treatment of both real and imagined opponents. During the so-called Red Terror of 1977-78, government security forces killed thousands of students and urban professionals. Because human rights violations characterized the government's policy toward dissidents, there was a constant exodus of young and educated people. The regime also found itself engaged in continuous civil war with one or more of the insurgent groups, which had a devastating impact on the people, the land, and the economy. The fighting not only generated hundreds of thousands of refugees but also displaced thousands of other people from their farms and villages. Forcible villagization and resettlement also generated refugees. In Harerge alone, the forced imposition of villagization prompted 33,000 people to flee to Somalia.

Famine also contributed to Ethiopia's refugee crises. The 1984-85 famine resulted in the death or displacement of hundreds of thousands of people within Ethiopia and forced about 100,000 into Somalia, 10,000 into Djibouti, and more than 300,000 into Sudan.

In 1987 another drought threatened 5 million people in Eritrea and Tigray. This time, however, the international community was better prepared to get food to the affected areas in time to prevent starvation and massive population movements. However, insurgents belonging to the TPLF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) attacked convoys carrying food supplies or denied them access to rebel-held areas because they believed the government would use relief convoys to cover the movement of military supplies. The consequence was more deaths and more refugees.

International relief agencies considered the 1990 famine more critical because of the scarcity of rain since 1987. Mitsiwa was one of the Eritrean ports where ships unloaded food and medical supplies for distribution to famine victims in Eritrea. Following the EPLF's capture of Mitsiwa in February 1990 and the government's bombing of the city in an effort to dislodge the insurgents, the port was out of action. A few months later, however, the EPLF and the Ethiopian government reached an agreement that allowed the port to reopen. In addition, the government lost control of Tigray in early 1989 and was reluctant to allow food shipments to go through rebel-held territory until May 1990, when the rebels, the government, the UN, and donor officials agreed to move grain supplies from Dese to Tigray. Food could not be airlifted into Tigray because fighting had destroyed the airport in Mekele, capital of Tigray. Sudan was the only nation through which food shipments could come to Tigray and Eritrea. Both the Relief Society of Tigray and the Eritrean Relief Association--arms of the TPLF and EPLF, respectively--operated food convoys from Sudan to Tigray and Eritrea. But poor road conditions and the fact that convoys had to operate at night to avoid Ethiopian air force attacks prevented adequate supplies from
reaching affected regions. Consequently, about 3 million people were threatened with death and starvation in Eritrea and Tigray.

Disagreements persist concerning the number of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia in the late 1980s. A UN survey estimated the number of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia at 450,000 to 620,000. The United States Catholic Relief Services (USCRS), however, estimated that about 410,000 refugees had returned to Ethiopia, leaving about 430,000 in Somali refugee camps. At the same time, more than 350,000 Somali of the Isaaq clan-family fled northern Somalia for Ethiopia after mid-1988. Most of these people remained in camps run by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Djibouti was home to about 45,000 Ethiopian refugees from the Ogaden by late 1978. These people had fled after Somalia's defeat in the Ogaden War. In 1983 the UNHCR began a repatriation program, which resulted in the departure of 15,000 former refugees by mid-1984. But the 1984 drought in Ethiopia brought an additional influx of 10,000 refugees into Djibouti. Slow, steady repatriation continued through 1989, by which time there were only 1,500 Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti.

A large influx of Ethiopian refugees into Sudan occurred in 1978, during the escalation of the conflict between Eritrean insurgents and the Mengistu regime. The influx continued into 1983, when the refugees numbered about 132,500. The 1984 drought and famine forced 160,000 refugees into Sudan in 1984 and more than 300,000 by April 1985. By June 1985, in anticipation of summer rains in Tigray, about 55,000 Tigray left Sudan, followed by another 65,000 in 1986, but only a small percentage of refugee Eritreans returned to Ethiopia.

Ethiopia also had been host to refugees from southern Sudan since 1983. As the conflict in southern Sudan between the SPLA and the Sudanese regime intensified, more refugees fled into western Ethiopia, where the Sudanese refugees numbered about 250,000 in early 1988 and perhaps 400,000 by early 1991.