

Brief history of famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s

A widespread famine affected Ethiopia from 1983 to 1985. It was the worst famine to hit the country in a century, it left 1.2 million dead. 400,000 refugees left the country, and 2.5 million people were internally displaced. Almost 200,000 children were orphaned.

It is known that half the mortality at the time could be attributed to human rights abuses which led the famine to come earlier, and have a far more widespread effect on the population of Ethiopia than it would otherwise have done.

Before the 1983–85 famine, two decades of wars of national liberation and other anti-government conflict had raged throughout the Tigray region (of Ethiopia) and Eritrea. The most prominent feature of the fighting was the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians by the Ethiopian army and air force. Excluding those killed by famine and resettlement, more than 150,000 people were killed.

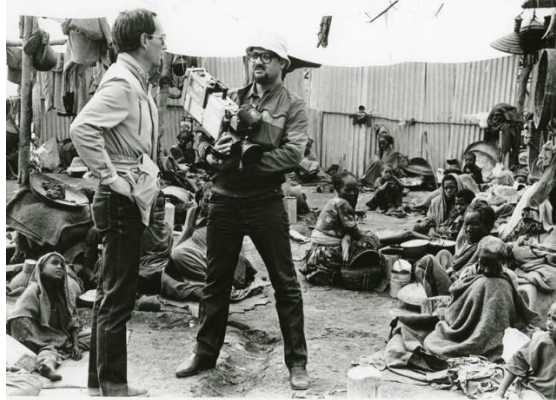
The economy of Ethiopia is based on agriculture: almost half of GDP, 60% of exports, and 80% of total employment come from agriculture.

By mid-1984, it was evident that another drought and resulting famine of major proportions had begun to affect large parts of northern Ethiopia. Just as evident was the government's inability to provide relief. The almost total failure of crops in the north was compounded by fighting in and around Eritrea, which hindered the passage of relief supplies. Although international relief organizations made a major effort to provide food to the affected areas, the persistence of drought and poor security conditions in the north resulted in continuing need, as well as hazards for famine relief workers. In late 1985, another year of drought was forecast, and by early 1986 the famine had spread to parts of the southern highlands, with an estimated 5.8 million people dependent on relief food. In 1986, locust plagues exacerbated the problem.

The Ethiopian government's unwillingness to deal with the 1984–85 famine provoked universal condemnation by the international community. Even many supporters of the Ethiopian regime opposed its policy of withholding food shipments to rebel areas. The combined effects of famine and internal war had by then put the nation's economy into a state of collapse.



Close to 8 million people became famine victims during the drought of 1984, and over 1 million died. In the same year a BBC news crew was the first to document the famine, with Michael Buerk leading the reports that shocked Britain, motivating its citizens to inundate relief agencies, such as Save the Children, with donations, and also to bring the world's attention to the crisis in Ethiopia.



In November 1984, the British Royal Air Force carried out the first airdrops delivering food to the starving people. Other countries including Sweden, East and West Germany, Poland, Canada, the United States and the Soviet Union were also involved in the international response.

Buerk's news piece on the BBC was seen by Irish singer Bob Geldof who, along with Ultravox frontman Midge Ure, quickly organised the charity supergroup Band Aid, primarily made up of the biggest British and Irish artists of the era. Their single, "Do They Know It's Christmas?", was released on 3 December 1984 and became Britain's best-selling single within a few weeks, eventually selling 3.69 million copies domestically. It raised £8 million for famine relief within twelve months of its release. Other charity singles soon followed; released in March 1985, "We Are the World" by USA for Africa was the most successful of these, selling 20 million copies worldwide.

Live Aid, a 1985 fund-raising effort headed by Geldof, induced millions of people to donate money, and to urge their governments to participate in the relief effort in Ethiopia. Some of the proceeds also went to the famine hit areas of Eritrea.

In France, French supergroup Chanteurs sans frontières released "SOS Éthiopie", which sold 1 million copies and raised 10 million francs (about 1.2 million dollars).

The manner in which international aid was routed through the RRC gave rise to criticism that forever changed the way in which governments respond to international emergencies taking place within conflict situations. International aid supplied to the government and to relief agencies working alongside the government became part of the counter-insurgency strategy of the government. It therefore met real and immediate need, but also prolonged the life of Mengistu's government. The response to the emergency raised disturbing questions about the relationship between humanitarian agencies and host governments.

Some believe the famine of 1983-1985 killed a minimum of 400,000 people (not counting those killed by resettlement), just in northern Ethiopia (Tigray province).

Other estimates put the total death toll in Ethiopia at 1.2 million dead, 400,000 refugees outside the country, 2.5 million people internally displaced, and almost 200,000 orphans. The majority of the dead were from Tigray (and other parts of northern Ethiopia).