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Famine in Somalia

It's not a natural disaster: It's murder

Patricia McCarthy

1992

THE FAMINE in Somalia has once again focussed attention on the problems of the less developed countries. Much of the response to the crisis is a short term one in the form of food aid. However in order to understand the causes of this and other famines in Africa it is necessary to race back the roots of the problem to colonisation and imperialism. It is necessary to focus on the political economic and social policies pursued in post-colonial times which perpetuate recurring famine and crisis. The role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are crucial in understanding what is really happening.

Most of the misery and famine which is unfolding in Africa today has its roots in imperialism, in the colonisation of African countries by European armies and business interests. Before the invasions the peoples of Africa were primarily subsistence farmers, hunters or traders; though there were also some highly developed civilisations that have been written out of the history books. It is true that in the past there were droughts but vast numbers of people did not starve.

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There are two main reasons for this, firstly African agriculture was much more diverse than it is now. People planted a variety of crops so that if one failed others which were more drought-resistant survived. Today most of the land is given over to growing cash crops for export to pay off crippling debts to Western banks. The second reason why droughts were not so devastating was because forests were far more extensive than they are now. Forests tend to stabilise rainfall patterns and also minimise the damage caused by floods in the rainy season.

Imperialism smashed the traditional African cycle of agriculture by demanding that Africans pay taxes in cash. This meant growing crops for sale on national and international markets.

The 20th century has seen a huge expansion in the acreage devoted to growing cash crops such as tea, coffee, cotton, rubber, cocoa, and ground nuts. Today much of the most fertile land in Africa is growing cash crops. Half of the food growing land in Senegal is growing peanuts for western margarine firms. Cash crops involve intensive cultivation and the extensive use of fertilisers which has led to land degradation, an increase in desert areas and the poisoning of the water table. The bulk of external debt in Africa is owed to Western governments.

Slavery and the damage it did to Africa is a significant factor in the underdevelopment and poverty which is never acknowledged by Western countries. Between 1701 and 1810 more than six million Africans were transported to the Americas to provide free labour for large farmers and businessmen. This haemorrhage of young men and women crippled African society.

External debt and falling commodity prices have had a crippling impact on African economies during the past decade. In the 1970s Western banks encouraged many less developed countries to borrow heavily. This borrowing, supposedly for roads and irrigation projects and so on was often siphoned off for personal use by dictators or wasted on useless projects or

on arms. The money was borrowed at low interest rates. Interest rates jumped from 6% to 18% in a few years, dramatically increasing the debts. In 1990 African debt was double what it was in 1980.

African countries were forced to call in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to seek a way out of their problems. However the 'solutions' of the I.M.F. have been to impose draconian and brutal cutbacks in health and education, and the abolition of food subsidies. This is a capitalist solution to a problem caused by capitalism in the first place. Famine, desperate poverty and the complete absence of health and education services are the result for millions of Africans.

Currency devaluations and cuts in public spending have led to massive unemployment. The export-oriented growth insisted on by the I.M.F. means an increase in cash crops and a consequent fall in food production. People in Africa are condemned to go hungry while the best land is used to grow tobacco, cotton, flowers, tea and coffee for the U.S., Europe and Japan

Very pathetic efforts were made under the Toronto Accord 1988 (an agreement signed by creditor governments after appeals from debtor countries) to alleviate the worst impact of this debt. Only seventeen countries were eligible under this agreement and the savings were minimal anyway. It is worth noting that even if the terms of a subsequent agreement, the Trinidad Agreement, had been extended to all debtor countries, which it was not because most creditor countries would not agree, debtor countries would still be spending one third of their export earnings on debt repayments.

External debt is the huge millstone on many poor African countries. The Irish Mozambique Solidarity Group estimate is that there is a net transfer of US\$30 million every day from the debtor countries to the West. In 1989 Richard Jolly, deputy director of UNICEF, estimated that at least 500,000 people died that year as a direct result of such debt.

Overpopulation is sometimes put across as a cause of famine. It is clear from the above analysis that overpopulation is not really a factor at all. Health services, which include contraception and abortion services, are certainly needed in Africa, not as a solution to famine but as part of the health and education services which are almost totally lacking. To argue that overpopulation is the cause of famine is not only to overlook all the historical factors but it is also seeks to blame the people of Africa themselves.

It is obvious that imperialism and capitalism, particularly the activities of the World Bank and the IMF are the causes of famine. A final point on overpopulation – it is a fact that the poorest countries have the largest number of children per family due to a combination of social and economic factors and conversely the richest countries have the smallest number of children per family. High standards of living, good health and education services all contribute to a low rate of population growth.

Finally a word about aid. By U.N. estimates it will take well over half a million tons of food to provide for Somalia alone over the next year. Yet only 30,000 tons of food monthly are being sent from donor countries. Worse still, other African countries under serious threat of mass starvation – such as southern Sudan – are being ignored because they are not yet in the news. Under capitalism food is used as a weapon and not as a resource to be equitably distributed. Until this corrupt system is replaced by a system, anarchism, which puts production and distribution for need before production for profit and power, people will continue to starve in Africa while the EC bosses worry about ways to dispose of their food mountains.