

The Politics of Food

This was written as a letter to colleagues, family and friends after I returned from my first trip to Ethiopia during the famine of 1984, when I served as Africa regional director for MAP International. Parts of it were subsequently published in various places.

Ethiopia. I just spent 10 days there and want to tell you what things are like. If you have been watching the news and seeing the pictures, you have some idea as to the situation there today. Let me tell you more about it.

Revolutionary Square

As you drive into Addis Ababa, the capital city, the first thing that strikes you is all the reminders of the recently completed, \$250 million celebration of the 10th anniversary of the revolution. Tall arches covered with red and yellow banners span the road, proclaiming the success of “revolutionary internationalism.” The national flag, featuring a red hammer and cycle against a yellow star, reminds you that you are in a communist country. So do the huge pictures of Marx, Engels and Lenin, patriarchs of the Russian Revolution. Local people, however, refer to them as the “three deafs” because collectively, they have only one ear showing, which indicates that they are “not listening” to what Ethiopians are saying.

Revolutionary Square with its huge parade grounds and reviewing stand is an impressive monument to the revolution—flags, pictures of Comrade President Mengistu and the inevitable “three deafs.”

The city is clean and relatively quiet compared to the chaos of downtown Nairobi. However, street urchins latch onto you everywhere saying, “No father. No mother. Give me a pen.” I walked around Addis with two other visitors shortly after my arrival in the city. We paused on the sidewalk in front of the Department of Defense to study a city map. Immediately, unsmiling guards came rushing out and ordered us to continue along. A few minutes later while walking through the city market, one of my companions took a few pictures, which resulted in our arrest by several officers and plainclothes policemen. The police commissioner into whose office we were led, took our names, addresses and passport numbers and let us go—with a stern warning to take no more pictures.

Properly chastened, the photographer in our group promised to comply and we were allowed to leave. While he had violated no laws, this incident did reflect the level of paranoia in Ethiopia today.

Famine Relief

Many international organizations are currently working in Ethiopia, attempting to provide food and other emergency supplies to starving people. Since the British Broadcasting System’s

documentary first focused the world's attention on Ethiopia several months ago, many tons of food have been shipped into the country. The port of Assab, a study in inefficiency at the beginning of the crisis, has been streamlined by more professional management following complaints by relief agencies and foreign governments.

Poor roads, the lack of trucks and rebel military activity in Tigray, Wollo and Eritrea Provinces have greatly slowed food distribution. The British government sent two Royal Air Force Hercules transports to move supplies by air. The Americans have also provided two planes and the Germans three. Although this is an expensive way to distribute food, at least you can move it quickly.

While I was visiting feeding centers in the north, the World Vision camp at Lalibela was preparing its last meals—food supplies were gone. The rebels had burned a convoy of 10 trucks a few days earlier, including two that were owned and operated by World Vision. The World Vision logistics coordinator in Addis pleaded for air transport to rush in food to replace what had been destroyed along the road. Instead of flying in a 10-ton load as requested, the German Air Force immediately dispatched three Hercules transports with 30 tons of food! There was a Thanksgiving prayer meeting on the tarmac as that third plane lifted off the ground at the Addis airport. In Lalibela, several thousand people ate supper.

A Succession of Grand Canyons

Ethiopia has been described as a succession of Grand Canyons. Looking down from the 15-passenger Twin Otter flown by two young Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilots, I noticed several things on the way north from Addis Ababa to Alamata, where I was going to visit a refugee camp. There was not a blade of grass on the mountains. As we crossed a succession of canyons and looked into the valleys, the rivers were dry. You could see a few goats foraging on the mountainside near small villages made up of a half-dozen grass houses, though what the animals were finding to eat is beyond me. There was no other sign of life. The land looked brown, dry, dusty and quiet.

Every time we approached the edge of one of the canyons, the wind currents bounced the plane around to the extent that I wondered if we would slam into the sides of the mountains between which we were flying. The other seven passengers looked as miserable as I felt but the pilots kept on eating their sandwiches, totally unconcerned.

In and Out

The plane circled over World Vision's feeding camp at Alamata, which was the signal for someone to pick us up at the airstrip three miles away. The government security man riding on every flight ordered us off as soon as the plane stopped at the end of the runway. We unloaded the food we had brought for the camp staff and the tents that had been sent for the Sisters of

Charity (Mother Theresa's Catholic order, which also operates a feeding camp at Alamata). All of this took only a few minutes.

The pilots shut down only one of the two engines during the unloading process. The nervous security man ordered the departing passengers to board and told the pilots to take off immediately. The government's security man is in charge, so they did.

The government has a tenuous grip on this region but knows that the rebels could move in anytime. The security man's responsibility is to make sure that they do not capture an airplane. This is less likely to happen if the plane is on the ground for only a few minutes and keeps an engine running. Shortly after the plane took off, a Land Rover carrying an Australian television crew pulled up, expecting to fly back to Addis Ababa as scheduled. They had assumed that the plane would wait, but they were wrong. I doubt that there were four more unhappy Aussies in all of Africa when we gave them the news!

Alamata

A town of 10,000 people in normal times, an influx of refugees from all over Wollo province has swollen the population to well over 40,000. In a small field just outside of town, several thousand people sit huddled on the ground in small groups—families, no doubt. You can see a few blankets on the ground, a water pot and maybe a pot for cooking. This has become home for many people who have come down from the mountains in search of food. The word has gone out that people are being fed here in Alamata so people are flocking in by the thousands.

You see people everywhere. Our driver went five miles per hour on the road, leaning on the horn to clear a path for the jeep. You can pick out the refugees immediately—they are the ones with no shoes, the ones wearing rags for clothes, the ones carrying a dirty gray blanket and a water pot, the ones who look thin and gaunt. The townspeople are the ones who appear somewhat better off; they are wearing clothes and shoes and the children are wearing school uniforms and carrying notebooks.

Holes in the Walls

The government requires everyone traveling in the interior of Ethiopia to have travel permits indicating where they are going and how long they plan to stay. You must also sign in when you arrive at your destination. While presenting my documents to the police commissioner at Alamata, I looked around the office and noticed bullet holes all over the room. This office had been the scene of heavy gunfire a year ago when the rebel forces attempted to take the town.

Although the army managed to retain control, local people live with the knowledge that the rebels could move down from the north at any moment. The presence of army troops and the civilian militia give the impression of a community under siege. I never got used to seeing young

boys who looked as if they belong in school, casually walking around with rifles and machine guns.

War and Famine

The success of the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front comes as no surprise. The government has spent billions of dollars on Soviet arms at a time when the people are hungry. An ostentatious celebration marking the 10th anniversary of the revolution cost another \$250 million at a time when the world was beginning to suspect that people were dying of hunger in Ethiopia.

The famine is most severe in the north where anti-government feeling is the strongest, so it's understandable that Comrade President Mengistu has been slow to acknowledge the problem and reluctant to do much about it. Many of the camps are feeding his enemies. At the same time, the Soviet Union would be tacitly admitting the failures of its economic policies if it provided food to its Ethiopian puppet. The Soviet-imposed state farms have been an economic disaster—one for which the people of Ethiopia are paying a heavy price.

Ethiopians are looking for peace and bread. The regime in Addis is giving them war and famine.

Food for Hungry People

There are three food distribution points in Alamata. World Vision has a controlled feeding program for children under the age of five, together with their families. The organization is currently feeding 7,000-8,000 people meals of porridge, cooked wheat, high protein biscuits and milk. To receive food, a family must have one child under five who falls below the 85th percentile on a certain scale that correlates weight to height. If one child qualifies, all the other children in the family can participate—together with one parent, usually the mother.

An assumption is made that if one child is malnourished, the rest of the family is also likely to need food. Rather than forcing mothers to divert food from the child qualified for the program so that she can feed her other children, all of them are accepted until they all meet minimal nutritional standards. The children are monitored on a weekly basis.

The Catholic Sisters of Charity operate a clinic in the World Vision feeding compound for those people requiring special medical attention. In back of the camp, the sisters operate a feeding program for anyone who needs food. People start lining up at 4:00 in the morning. By 7:00 a.m. when the feeding begins you see approximately 10,000 people sitting in rows on the ground, waiting to eat. Workers dip porridge from 10-gallon containers into plates that are distributed by other workers to the crowd. They start feeding those in the front.

Newcomers line up in the back while those who finish eating hand in their plates and walk quietly away. What impresses you the most is the eerie silence—hardly a word is being spoken

anywhere. The children sit quietly, too weak to play or shout. They just sit listlessly, eyes dull, waiting..... The kitchen cooks porridge in 55-gallon barrels, 24 hours a day.

The government also has a distribution station in Alamata, but instead of serving hot meals it is providing whole grains and flour which people take home and cook for themselves. The government distributes food several times a week so you see many men coming into town with their donkeys, carrying empty sacks. After receiving their supplies, they load the sacks of food onto the animals and head back up the mountains. I saw several thousand people waiting for grain and flour so I assume that tens of thousands will benefit from what I saw distributed.

Each sack had a small symbol showing two clasped hands against the stars and stripes; the words printed on the sack read: "Donated by the people of the United States." I have heard the media say that food provided by donor nations is being diverted by the government to feed the army. Perhaps. Nobody really knows the extent to which this may be happening. However, I saw American grain not only being used in the soup kitchens run by World Vision and the Sisters of Charity, but also distributed in a government-run food center. I also saw dozens of trucks heading north into the mountains with more U.S.-donated food that was destined for hungry people.

The Lady in the Market

On market day, several of us went to see what people had brought to sell. The scene was similar to markets I have visited in many other towns in Africa, with one exception: people were selling their pots, pans, clothes, cattle and donkeys.

I saw a young mother with her two year-old child, a small pot filled with water, two cow skins and a plow point. We asked her what she was doing in the market. Her family had nothing to eat, she said, so she had skinned the carcasses of her last two cattle, which had just died. She was now trying to sell the hides in order to buy some food. Without these bulls, she did not need the plow so hoped to sell it as well. By now it was noon and the sun was getting hot, but nobody had even made her an offer.

She wanted the equivalent of two dollars for the plow, which in normal times would bring many times that price. Since other people were also selling their tools, prices had been driven down.

Even if it starts raining again, families like this one will have to start over without seeds, tools and bulls to pull the plows. The problem, therefore, goes beyond the momentary lack of food. The long-term issue is one of trying to reestablish food production in an area where the basis for agriculture has been destroyed.

The Children of Ethiopia

In World Vision's Alamata camp, a line forms outside the main gate each morning. Several nurses walk through the hundreds of people who have come for food, looking for sick people,

nursing mothers and malnourished children. Those who look as if they fall under the standard that has been established are given a slip of paper and admitted to the screening area in the camp. The sick are sent directly to the clinic inside the wire fence. The rest stand in line and wait to be weighed and measured. Any child whose weight (as correlated to height) places him/her at below the 85th percentile according to the established scale is admitted to the program. A hospital patient arm band indicates that someone been accepted into the program and indicates to which of the six feeding stations that person should go for food.

Children falling below the 70th percentile are placed in an intensive feeding program where they receive six meals per day, instead of three like the rest. Those below the 60th percentile are placed in a “super intensive” ward and actually remain inside the camp. The rest leave the compound after the last feeding of the day to seek shelter in town or to sleep in the field.

In the intensive feeding room, two shifts of 600 children and parents are fed their six meals of porridge, protein biscuits and hot milk. It takes about 12 hours to feed everyone twice. It was working. You could see improvements on an almost daily basis.

Many of those in the “super intensive” room, on the other hand, were too weak to eat so had food dripped into their stomachs by tubes running through their noses. These children are virtual skeletons—reddish skin stretched tight over bones, match-stick arms and legs, big expressionless eyes and wisps of brown hair matted across the tops of their heads.

The camp doctor quietly explained to me that for most of these children it was too late, but he had to try anyway. Two days later, one-fourth of the children I saw in that room were dead, but there were plenty of replacements.

Each morning, eight thousand people pass through the camp gate upon showing their wrist bands to one of the guards. The next 12 hours are spent waiting in line to get into the assigned feeding areas or to eat the prepared meals. Many of the sick lay on the ground, covered by tattered clothes that are used for blankets. On the first day I was there, I started to kick aside what I thought to be a rag in the middle of a path. It moved. Underneath, I found a four year-old child, too weak to walk. A crowd gathered and someone summoned the doctor. Even as he gave instructions to carry the boy to the clinic, the doctor caught my eye and gave a little shake of his head. I didn't have to ask what he meant.

Life Without Water

Eight thousand people in an area the size of two football fields and no water; that's what we had. This means that people could not wash their hands or faces. Most have diarrhea. Many of the children have eye infections and sores on their bodies. Their faces are covered with flies. Mothers wipe the bottoms of their children (who are suffering from diarrhea) and then keep right on eating.

Although several new latrines had just been built outside the camp, most people were relieving themselves out in the fields. Children with diarrhea do not worry much about what they leave behind so the smell of human waste hangs heavily in the air.

“Please Protect the People”

On evening, I glanced at the clouds in the sky and then remarked to an Ethiopian nurse that it looked like rain. Yes, he replied, he was afraid so. In a country devastated by severe drought, I wondered about that comment, so he explained.

Most of the people sleep outside and therefore have little protection against the cool mountain air. Many have sold their blankets and extra clothes for food. Their weakened bodies have little resistance so each time it rains, there is an outbreak of pneumonia throughout the country. It rained twice while I was visiting Alamata, both times in the middle of the night. It was not enough so that farmers could try planting again, but it was enough so that a number of people died of pneumonia.

“Every night we pray for rain,” the nurse explained to me, “but we know that many are going to die if it does so we ask the Lord to please protect the people.”

The Horn

I usually woke up around 4:00 a.m. since my roommate (the World Vision doctor from the Netherlands) liked to sleep with the window open. Sometimes it was the roosters that woke me. The rest of the time it was the sound of the horn blowing, signaling the death of yet another person. Between four and five o'clock in the morning, people in Alamata began to gather the bodies of those who had died in the encampments during the night, and to prepare them for burial. As each body is discovered, someone announces it by blowing a horn.

Later in the morning, the family will carry their dead to the little Orthodox Church at the top of the hill beside the camp. Again, it is accompanied by the sound of a horn.

All around the hill below the church, I saw the graves. I walked around the hill, counting the new mounds of dirt. Many of these new graves were tiny ones. After several hundred, I stopped counting and just watched the grave-digging crew at work. Then I climbed to the top of the hill and walked around the church where I saw the bodies of several people lying on the veranda, waiting for their graves to be finished. The families wailed outside the gate.

Life and Death in Alamata

Standing at the top of the hill in front of the church, I looked at the mountains on either side. Several tents on each peak signified the presence of a small army garrison, guarding against potential attacks from rebel forces. In back of me, two groups of men waited to carry their dead

to the graves below. I saw that one of the graves had just been finished, but the diggers immediately moved on to start another.

Directly in front of me, I could see several thousand people sitting quietly in rows as they waited for food from the Sisters of Charity kitchen. Thousands more waited in line for food inside the World Vision feeding camp. Less than half a mile to the left, several trucks loaded with food began the slow climb up the mountain to Korem where I had seen 40,000 people the day before—also waiting for food. Off in the distance, I could see a huge dust cloud as a Hercules transport settled down on the runway, bringing another load of food to Alamata.

Signs of Hope

I expected to find the staff of the camp almost overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness. Instead, they took great pride in pointing out children who had been at the point of starvation several weeks ago but were now playing in the dirt. Three weeks earlier the camp was quiet, but now you could hear the occasional shout of children. The new arrivals were lethargic and listless but even my untrained eye could see the difference during the six days I spent in the area.

The purpose of my visit was to assess how educational concepts could be used to help the staff of the feeding center deal with health problems. People use the field for a bathroom, which leads to the spread of intestinal parasites. People do not wash their hands before they eat, so with nearly everyone suffering from diarrhea the problem spreads from hand to mouth. Many of the children have eye infections that could be alleviated if they washed their faces. Others have festering sores that should be cleaned and dressed.

Hopefully, the water supply will be working in a couple of weeks, which should help considerably.

Meanwhile, we tried to help people in the camp understand how they could break the cycle of diarrhea by using the latrine outside the camp rather than relieving themselves in the fields. Even without water, this would be a good start. I showed the camp workers how to convey health messages using stories, plays and songs, which are traditional teaching methods in African society.

Ato Gabre Xavier

Thousands of people heard a nurse tell the fictional story of Ato Gabre Xavier, who had five children, two of which died because of diarrhea. When his favorite son became ill he took him to the health center for treatment, but it was too late. The son also died. Torn with grief, Ato Gabre Xavier went to visit a friend in another village who explained that they had formerly suffered from the same problem. However, since everyone dug latrines and began using them, people no longer suffered from diarrhea. The friend explained the link between uncovered human waste and the spread of disease; he encouraged Ato Gabre Xavier to dig his own latrine and to use it.

This story was written by an Ethiopian nurse, introduced by health workers in the camp and retold countless times by the people themselves. Sometimes it was acted out in drama. Other times, it was retold by those in the audience. This became the only entertainment in the camp—good entertainment judging by the laughter, applause and sound effects accompanying the drama—as well as an important health lesson. It remains to be seen if the listeners will also change their behavior in response to the message of the stories.

As I left, members of the nursing staff were writing other health stories that will also be shared throughout the camp. Each outlines a health problem, shows why it exists, suggests a solution and provides encouragement to act upon this new information. Most importantly, the health lesson is embedded in a story that can be told or acted out as drama. A seminar for the feeding center staff further expanded the use of stories for promoting healthful behavior. At the end of the training seminar, several original songs were written and put to music. The first one to be completed (and subsequently introduced in the camp) also dealt with diarrhea and how its spread could be controlled by the use of latrines.

The songwriter taught it to some of the patients in the camp and then returned to his regular responsibilities as chief nurse. He gave the words to a young boy, but ran out of time before he could share the tune. No problem. The boy developed his own in a matter of minutes and then began teaching the song—complete with his new melody—to anybody who would listen. Although I may not be looking for songs about diarrhea when I turn on the radio, it is a culturally appropriate form of both education and entertainment in this context.

Our hope is that by providing additional training and encouragement, the camp workers will continue writing and using songs and stories to help people learn and adopt more healthful behaviors.

“Take the Day Off”

After six days, it was time to leave Alamata. Off in the distance, I saw a plane in its final landing approach so I urged the driver to hurry as we traveled to the air strip. I knew that the pilot would not wait for me. Instead of World Vision’s Twin Otter, I saw two Hercules transport planes on the ground with the tailgates down, and some Royal Air Force crewmen unloading high protein biscuits.

A young man carrying a flight bag and wearing several cameras around his neck emerged from one of the planes and came over to talk with me. With a New England accent, he said, “I am an American journalist and I am here to....” Over the roar of the engines that had been left running, I shouted “That’s great!” and sprinted for the plane. I had nothing else to say. I climbed up onto the flight deck and asked the pilot for a ride to Addis. He shrugged and told me to crawl into the back. I dropped my bag on top of some spare tires that were held down by netting, and started unloading biscuits.

The last carton was soon piled on the ground and everybody jumped in; before the tailgate was completely closed, we were on our way. The other Hercules was right behind us.

Halfway to Addis, the captain came on the intercom and told his crew to take the rest of the day off. There was no more food left to deliver. A young crewman who had expected to haul a number of loads all over Ethiopia that day pounded his fist against the side of the aircraft and swore. Turning to me in utter frustration, he snarled: "We have the planes and we want to help! Where is the food?"

Worse Rather than Better

The earliest that the rains could come would be in February or March, which means that any crops planted now would not be ready until April or May. This growing season, however, typically provides only 20 percent of Ethiopia's annual food supply. The major growing season usually begins with the rains in June or July. Food only starts to become widely available in September, October or November. That's many months away....

For the past two years, however, it has not rained. Now people have eaten their seed, most of their cattle have died and they have sold their tools for food. The problem will get worse rather than better.

There is No Substitute for Help

Somebody told me in Ethiopia that if all the food supplies currently in the pipeline were delivered, there would be enough for 15 days. I doubt that these figures are accurate but it really doesn't matter. No ships were waiting to unload at the Port off Assab, and in Addis Ababa, the Hercules transports were sitting on the ground.

I hope that people don't forget Ethiopia. I never will

Merrill