

# Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

EXPLAINED .....>

# What is Weaponized Starvation?

- **Withholding food during times of conflict can be just as detrimental as guns, bombs, and explosives of opposing armies.** Hunger has been used as a weapon of war for decades.
- **The political acts which cause hunger / starvation can be divided into acts of commission, omission, and provision.**
  - Acts of commission are attacks on food production, markets and the restriction of people's movement. Omission is the failure to act when food relief is blocked. Provision is the selective provision of aid to one side of a conflict.
- **The link between war and hunger was recognised explicitly with the passing of a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution in 2018 which prohibited the use of hunger as a weapon of war.** These issues don't apply just to people living in conflict areas, but also to those living in areas with long-term political instability.

# Recent History of Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

Haile Selassie



- The last imperial ruler of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, practiced a policy of concealment throughout his regime and **deliberately ignored famines in the Tigray region** in 1954-58, 1965-67 and again in Afar, Wollo and Tigray in 1973-74.
- Although famine posed a risk to the image of the imperial regime on the world stage during a period where the rest of the continent was fighting colonial powers, **it was deliberately used as a tool of suppression where aid was withheld in areas that opposed imperial rule, especially the Tigrayan youth and peasants.**
- Reports of famine were consistently ignored or denied.
  - Haile Selassie is often criticized for his indifference to hunger in multiple parts of Ethiopia. He was known to have lavish parties.
  - During the 1974 famine, Ethiopia maintained its position as net exporter of food for foreign capital gain while over 200,000 people died from famine.
  - This policy of indifference by the imperial regime was highlighted in a 1991 Human Rights Watch report: “[Haile Selassie’s] attitude was that peasants always starve and nothing can be done, and that in any case it was not the Shewan Amhara who were dying.”

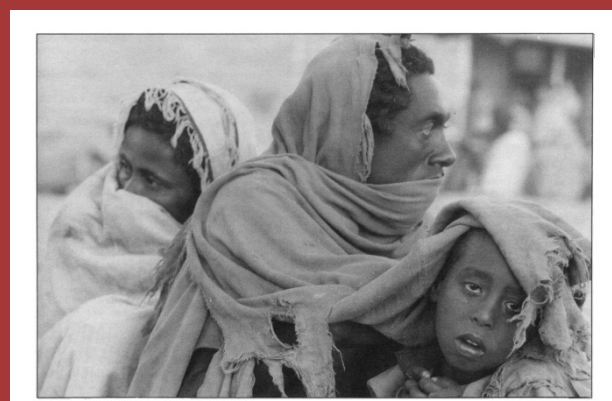
# Recent History of Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

The Derg



- Many groups opposed the imperial regime. In 1974, a collection of opposition groups overthrew Emperor Haile Salessie. In 1977, a military junta, the Derg, quickly sought to consolidate power. It abolished the monarchy and worked to weaken political competitors through massacres and starvation.

- **A widespread famine affected Ethiopia during the Derg regime (1983-1985), leaving over 1.2 million dead in the country.**



Famine refugees from the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia.

Mike Goldwater/Network

## Ethiopia and the Politics of Famine Relief

Gayle Smith

**F**amine takes root when farmers lose their means of production. In Africa, drought and war have forced huge numbers of peasants to sell off their animals and abandon the land on which they depend, thus bringing local economies to a standstill. Grain yields in Africa declined by one-third per hectare over the last decade; food production is down by 16 percent since 1981. One out of every five Africans now depends on food aid. Interest payments on international loans now consume \$15 billion per year. The continent's industrial base is functioning at only one-third of capacity. The incidence of famine among Africa's rural producers has in turn brought national economies to a halt.

While depleting Africa of more people than at any time since the slave trade era, the African famine of the 1980s continues to open the door to massive amounts of the aid that is serving to relegate local economies and stimulate national economies into the global system. As the provider of 50 percent of all economic and humanitarian assistance to Africa, the United States is setting the terms of "economic development" throughout much of the continent. A 1983 CIA report forecast the recurrence of

famine in much of Africa through the 1990s and warned of the continent's vulnerability to socialist trends in the face of continued starvation.<sup>1</sup> Under the Reagan administration, economic development revolves around policy reforms designed to bolster private sector development. On his January 1987 trip to Africa, Secretary of State George Shultz spoke of a "new partnership between the US and black Africa based on a shared vision of free enterprise as the basis for economic development."<sup>2</sup> According to the World Bank, 22 of 54 low-income countries in Africa targeted for assistance by the Reagan Administration have initiated US-sponsored economic reforms, including withdrawals of government subsidies, devaluation of local currencies and decreased support to public sector initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

In Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia, US policy aims at establishing some leverage over these countries' broader political orientation and especially their international alliances. Washington's approach exhibits three major variations on the Reagan Doctrine. Whether these variations demonstrate the flexibility of the doctrine or its fragility remains to be seen. At one end of the spectrum is Angola, where US policy seems determined to replace

- The 1984 famine in Tigray was orchestrated through the **destruction of civilian lives, food production capacities, commerce, and forced resettlement.**
- During the 1984 famine, senior Derg officials were caught stating that **"to kill the fish, you drain the water"** to justify aggression towards certain political groups.

# Recent History of Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

## The Derg



- In 1991, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Tigray's famine during Derg in 1984 was utilized as a cover to the man made famine that the Derg created. A Derg official was even caught saying that they were utilizing food supplies as a "counter-insurgency tool."
- According to the report, there were three elements that confirmed the famine was man made:
  - Military campaign from the government to suppress the population beginning in 1980, including the **destruction of grain stores, killing of cattle, burning of crops and pastures**, enforced collection of taxes and contributions, forcible displacement of farmers, destruction of villages;
  - **Bombing of Tigray starting mid 1980s** (markets, villages, churches, schools, and farmers ploughing their land); and
  - The restriction of movement and trade in Tigray starting in 1980, including **the restriction on grain trade, implemented to increase the price of grain in Tigray and intended to target the TPLF and its supporters.**

# Recent History of Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

The Derg

- "The government was determined to restrict the food supply to the TPLF and **to attack the economic base of the population that supported it,**" the HRW report read. History is repeating itself in 2020 under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.



# Current Day Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

- **IMPACT:** More than 4.5 million people need emergency food in Tigray.
- **CONTEXT:** Since PM Ahmed declared war on Tigray on November 4, 2020, over 60,000 civilians have fled into Sudan. There is no access to electricity, clean water, and the internet in the region of Tigray. Banks and phone lines only work, with limitations, in the capital city of Mekelle. **There is a critical shortage of food, medicine, fuel, and cash.**
  - January 8, 2021: Tigray administrators and NGO officials confirmed that without aid, hundreds of thousands may starve to death. **People are already dying from starvation and unclean water.**
  - January 2021: A Doctors Without Borders official said that in the towns of Adigrat, Adwa, and Axum, the level of civilian casualties is extremely high.

**The elderly are dying in their sleep.**

# Current Day Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

- **CAUSES:** Eritrean troops looted markets, small shops, and residences in the past two months. **Eritrean troops and the Amhara militia also burnt crops that were ready for harvestation.** Satellite imageries have confirmed the destruction of crops and the U.N. World Food Programme compound at one refugee camp.
  - “Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon” as the Tigray region is “being starved into submission.” - The Economist, January 2021
  - According to the UN, this is a human made tragedy, with purposeful ‘red tape’ created by the Ethiopian Ministry of Peace. **“Plenty of food is available. Charities and UN agencies have been trying to get supplies through for months. But Ethiopia’s Orwellian Ministry of Peace has sent them on a paper chase for permits.”**
  - UN Humanitarian Chief, Mark Lowcock, states: “For more than two months there has been essentially no access to Tigray... There are 450 tonnes of supplies we’ve been trying to get in that are stuck.”
- **CHALLENGES:** During the war, Tigray’s infrastructure (roads, hospitals, government/NGO buildings) was also destroyed. Efforts to provide food aid and medical care to those in need will be a challenge.



# CALL TO ACTION



- **Hunger is currently being used as a weapon in Tigray:** markets looted, crops burned, no electricity/water, and banks/humanitarian corridors closed in most parts of Tigray. **The Ethiopian government has failed Tigrayan civilians yet again.**
- The international community should call for the **withdrawal of Eritrean troops** from Tigray.
- The international community should demand the following actions by the Ethiopian government immediately:
  - **Open banks and allow full financial services in all of Tigray;**
  - **Allow unfettered humanitarian access to all of Tigray;**
  - **Allow unrestricted access to local and international media;**
  - **Restore Tigray's destroyed infrastructure (roads and hospitals).**
- The World Food Programme should coordinate food air dropping to most inaccessible areas of Tigray immediately.

# Stay Involved



@omnatigray | omnatigray.org

#StopWarOnTigray, #TigrayGenocide, #ReconnectTigray, #BidenActNow

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