
STARVING IN SILENCE

A Report on Famine and Censorship

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PREFACE

Causes of Famine

The eminent economist Amartya Sen has said that censorship causes famine and that, therefore, famine cannot occur in a country with a free press. This is a strong statement and, if vindicated by evidence, is perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for an end to censorship. Famine, as this report describes, is a mass killer. In the last decade alone perhaps two million people have died from starvation and associated diseases. If censorship can be eradicated, then famine can become a preventable catastrophe rather than an Act of God.

The themes addressed in this, the third of the ARTICLE 19 Censorship Reports, are: *censorship as a cause of famine* and *the role of censorship in delaying relief of starvation, leading to massive deaths*. The case studies in this report, China's famine of 1959-61 and the famines in the Horn of Africa in the 1980s, focus on these themes.

In recent years there has been considerable debate about the real causes of famine. Earlier assumptions about the validity of the simple links between drought, crop failure and famine have been called into question. Instead, rather more complex economic hypotheses have been proposed, which study the relationships between food availability, prices and peasant purchasing power. The thesis is that famine results from a lack of *access* to food, whether that is due to loss of purchasing power to buy food which, though scarce, may be available or due to the absence of food at any price.

Such arguments cannot, however, ignore the fact that some regions of the world are more prone to drought (still generally accepted to be a major cause of famine) than others, by virtue of infertile land, low level of development, over-grazing or population density. Environmentalists claim that famine (by which it is usually meant the threat of famine) is unavoidable and therefore

that food must be supplied, usually from abroad, in sufficient quantity and early enough to prevent death on a large scale.

These debates about the nature of famine are important and are implicit in the case studies of recent famines in Ethiopia and Sudan. In both countries, the major precipitating factors for the famines were indeed rain failure and crop loss. But this report argues that these are not sufficient conditions; if timely information can be collected and if it is then made freely available to governments and donors, widespread damage and loss of life can be mitigated.

The first case study, that of the Great Famine in China between 1959-61, illustrates this well. It acknowledges that drought and flood played a part, but goes on to show that the famine was at least as much attributable to artificial conditions created by the State: the vast reorganisation of agriculture, the rapid introduction of backyard steel industries and, above all, the climate of misinformation, exaggeration and propaganda. This study suggests that in China the truth was deliberately veiled and millions died as a result.

The second case study concerns famine in the Horn of Africa in the last decade. In the Sudan and Ethiopia, information on the impending famines was indeed available, but it was in the political interests of the governments of both countries, as well as of the international donor countries, to suppress and ignore warnings until the need to act became overwhelming, and too late to save the lives of many thousands.

Censorship therefore played a pivotal and disastrous role in these cases. In China, Ethiopia and Sudan the potential victims of starvation were unable to alert the wider world to their plight until their governments agreed. Nor, most importantly, were they free to organise themselves to make demands on local, regional or central authorities for agricultural or other economic safeguards to forestall food shortages.

The case studies in this report constantly underline the theme of access to *credible information*. The Ethiopian Famine of 1982-5 was rightly called an information crisis. The exhaustive analyses carried out with hindsight have shown the real difficulty in knowing what food stocks were held by the government and therefore what was an appropriate relief package.

International donors were reluctant to pour food into a hostile country with no guarantee that it would reach the targetted starving and, equally, with no commitment from the government that it would release a portion of its own food stocks. Because of military offensives taking place during the crucial famine months, both the numbers of people starving and where precisely they were located, were strongly censored facts. The climate of rumour and confusion, of accusation and counter-accusation between the government and the international donor community, absorbed time and energy at a critical stage when a properly organised relief effort could have saved many thousands of lives.

In China between 1959 and 1961, government control of information was the cause of famine. Whether or not the leaders actually believed the assurances that all was well and that agricultural production was about to surpass that of the previous bumper year, is not, and probably cannot ever be fully known. But what was important was the myth that was perpetrated and sustained through fear. This was a wholly effective barrier to real information and therefore to any preventive, or even timely relief action.

Underdevelopment, which is the root cause of famine, is a political as well as an economic issue. It cannot be resolved in the absence of freedom of information and freedom of expression. This is not a momentous discovery. It is a message which has been repeated over and over again by development agencies, for at least a decade. However, the peculiar significance of *censorship* in famine is not a connection frequently made by these development agencies. This is partly because censorship is all too often thought of as the banning of newspapers or of radio and TV programmes or the imprisonment of journalists and writers. It is, of course, all these things but it is also a far more pervasive and insidious abuse involving the suppression of legitimate cries for help and of calls for the more equal distribution of wealth.

A long tradition of censorship, maintained with heavy and inhuman sanctions, diminishes even the expectation among the oppressed that they can remonstrate - that they can be heard. And if this is the climate which prevails amongst famine-prone communities then the only response to threatened

famine is to try desperately, and often in vain, to cope themselves rather than to rely on government institutions or on foreign relief. The climate of despair which results from the failure to cope in the face of increasing odds is where the famine begins - and ends. Famine is therefore born of suppression of information and of inaction. It culminates in desperate action to stay alive, actions which are often in themselves life-threatening. The community, which has no remaining option but to trek to distant areas of possible relief, becomes psychologically and physiologically weakened. The enforced abandonment of home and a myriad of supportive kin and other networks, permanently impairs that community's chance of long-term viability, even supposing it can avoid immediate starvation.

The Indian Experience

In order to trace the connections between freedom of expression and information, democracy and the conquest of famine, a useful contrast is the experience of India in the 1980s. India has suffered massive famine deaths quite regularly since the Middle Ages. These continued up to the beginning of the 1970s. Today, however, the likelihood of anything but a highly localised and short-lived food shortage in India is extremely remote. The thesis proposed is that because India, unlike Ethiopia and the Sudan, has a democracy and has a free press, the likelihood of devastating famine is greatly reduced.

There are three main factors which militate against mass starvation in India:

- i) the holding of major national buffer stocks in staple grains and the infrastructure (including rail and road) with which to move these stocks quickly;
- ii) the longstanding institution of public works schemes, year in and year out, which are expanded to offer employment to the poorest in times of special hardship and
- iii) a widespread and free press (at national, State and even district levels in both English and the vernacular) which reaches a substantial percentage of the literate population. There is a fourth factor, that is democracy in the form of national and local elections, with a range of contesting political parties.

Press freedom as a factor needs qualification because India did have famines up to the beginning of the 1970s, despite its independent press and long-established electoral system. The most important difference now, as compared to the 1970s, is that there is sufficient food held in reserve to deal even with so widespread an emergency as the drought which led to the crisis in 1987-8. This buffer stock resulted largely from the green revolution. India's recent history, therefore, would suggest that it is possible to have a famine even with a free press if a country is not geared to respond. This is particularly true if it does not dispose of its own stocks but depends, as in the case in Africa, on international aid. On the other hand, it must be emphasised that it is not possible for a country with a free press to hide a famine or to avoid major public pressure to respond. India, perhaps, provides the clearest example of this in the world.

What is striking about the media in India is not just that the press reports drought and deprivation regularly but that it constantly *analyses* it. Long articles by Indian economists and other researchers appear regularly in the daily newspapers in addition to the 'human interest' articles in newspapers and magazines. Thus, informed debate, especially on the economics of the subject, is in the public domain and not confined to academic journals. In India, researchers act as journalists in a very major way and India's plethora of research institutions regularly feed the press.

A further crucial difference lies in the access to government information which researchers, journalists and indeed local politicians have. This is a major advantage because the information available at government level is based on reasonably accurate estimates of both harvests and consumption needs and they are regularly updated. This constant monitoring allows for a warning period to become, as it were, institutionalised within the government system. The facts are freely available for the press to use as part of their daily coverage of areas of famine vulnerability.

In formal terms, famine relief in India is the responsibility of each State government. The *Scarcity Manuals*¹ define the responsibilities of the officials, in which it is the District Collector (who is also the Chief Magistrate of the District) who plays the pivotal role. The essence of the *Scarcity Manuals*¹ has

not changed in the century since their institution: the nub is that government must alleviate destitution by offering employment on public works schemes, having undertaken prescribed steps to gauge the production shortfall, the demand for relief employment and the local geography of need. Employment is remunerated in cash at official minimum daily wage levels, sometimes in cash and food or often entirely in food.

This combination of a free press and a well-entrenched relief system has forced the spectre of famine to recede in the last decade. Press coverage of the 1987-8 crisis illustrates more clearly how information and argument were brought together to tackle fundamental difficulties.

The growing season for the 1987-8 crop was badly affected by drought and the predictions for the overall national grain yield were becoming more and more pessimistic. In addition, drought in one or several states during the previous four years had severely depleted the country's national buffer stock reserve such that in July 1989 it was 2 million tonnes short of the prescribed level. In May 1988, the *Indian Express*, in an article entitled "Drought Relief: Myth and Reality", published a highly critical account of famine relief in Rajasthan. Readers were told that since January 1988 more than 200 children had died of malnutrition-related causes in a sub-division of one of the most arid regions of the country, namely Jaisalmer district. Local doctors, readers were told, explained that although starvation means not eating at all, and that the population in question had a meal per day of sorts, the fact was that children were so weakened by malnutrition that any minor infection was killing them. The thrust of the article was that behind the impressive - sounding government statistics of relief provision, there was a story of widespread and severe hardship, and that drought relief measures were reaching only 15% of the population.

In August 1988 *The Times of India* gave an account of a 1987 survey carried out by the National Institute of Nutrition in five states. In brief, the availability of staple food to a majority in 1987 was closer to the non-drought norm of an average 2,000² kcal per capita per day, compared with 100-1400 kcal per capita in previous droughts. However in 1987 there was a distinct decline in the availability of so-called protective foods which include pulses, milk, oil and

vegetables and the conclusion was that quality was much worse affected than quantity. No household in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat was found to be on starvation energy intakes (ie that is less than 500 kcal per head per day) while there were 0.7% in Tamil Nadu, 1% in Orissa and 1.5% in Karnataka. The equivalent percentages for earlier droughts (going back to the 1960s was 4.7 in Andhra Pradesh, 8% in Bihar and 3.8% in Maharashtra). Nevertheless, in 1987 readers were told that in four of the five surveyed states, bodyweights of adult men and women were found to be lower than normal.

The conclusion from these two articles alone is that the press was informing a wide readership that although there was no famine as such by comparison with previous Indian experience, there was great hardship. Children were still dying unnecessarily as a result of localised pockets of famine. Meanwhile, there were many reports of the central government drought relief budgeting which, at 15 billion rupees in 1987-8, without question demonstrated a major decision to commit huge funding to the emergency at the cost of other government investment programmes. The statistics of relief work are indeed remarkable: more than 1.5 million people employed on over 3,000 public works schemes in Gujarat by the end of 1987 and as many as 83,000 public works, which were of ten small in scale, scattered around Rajasthan. The press included straight reporting of such announcements by State government ministers but also many counter-balancing stories of the failures. Thus, for example, *The Statesman*, in August 1987 berates local administrators in Rajasthan:

“In their district headquarters within sight of their myopic vision, the authorities ignore the daily exodus from the villages to the cities ... payments (for last year's relief works) are long overdue in the official records while a fresh drought is on the people. Significantly, the criticism here is that the administration's enthusiasm for relief work provision has long overtaken its allotted budget”.

There was also much criticism in the press about the quality of relief work, especially the lack of durability of earthworks and the lack of long-term advantage to the labourers from the works which they achieve. This, of course, is a long-standing argument about public works advantages in which

non-governmental organisations and others are engaged. Corruption of contractors is often criticised in general terms, cutting the income transfer to the destitute on public works from the official minimum payment of 12-14 rupees per day to half, which was actually received by the worker.

Famine is also a subject of enduring interest among the general population in India. It is not an event which is regarded as inevitable or beyond the interest of the urban and more affluent citizens. It is a matter of intense political interest and, therefore, affects everybody. Famine has become a topic of national importance, in the way that interest rates are in Europe and the US. And this is mainly because of the prominence given to it by the press.

The examples quoted above show the press pushing government and officials to fulfil the tasks allotted to them. It is clear, therefore, that the uncensored press is one important part of a society which has an expectation of real government action on the one hand and an endless experience of public and private corruption on the other. The government response creates effective demand amongst the destitute, whilst in Africa one could argue that the only effective demand is that of international publicity.

The press reflects as well as promotes democracy, however flawed, and certainly informs a wide section of the public. As to the general effect, no Indian government can be seen to ignore or be ungenerous with famine response and the authorities are quick to advertise their commitments in the press. By the same token, failures to meet these commitments are to some extent picked up in the press. The academic or political debate in the press is impressive but, one suspects, not especially influential in the sphere of famine itself. It is more a continuation of the poverty debate which the press does much to keep alive.

Possibly the most direct effect on government action is to be found in the *local press*: both local authorities and local politicians wish to be well-reported. The damaging effect of a particular scandal might be mitigated by press coverage and result in early corrective action. The articles of journalists reporting on villages without succour can, for example, mobilise a district collector or lower official into action.

However, it is probably not right to view the press as the instigator of relief operations: there is a system of redistribution which goes into motion in response to emergency conditions. There is a public expectation of major action and the government *does* put huge sums of money towards emergency response.

The Indian example is a salutary one. Famine can be avoided if there is a commitment to do so - a commitment which necessarily involves the political will as well as the allocation of resources. But neither the will nor the resources can be sustained without pressure: the pressure comes from public awareness which is translated into votes. The political vulnerability of state governors in India who face the electorate every five years is a crucial factor. The mechanism through which such pressure is sustained is the local, and often vernacular, press.

Conclusion

Ethiopian and Chinese famine studies show very clearly that although knowledge of starvation clearly must have existed - after all, the starving do know a famine when it affects them - that knowledge had no resonance and thus no power. It is, of course, debatable whether Chairman Mao himself and other senior party officials really believed the false claims of abundant food. Some of his officials obviously did not and were severely punished for expressing their doubts. The conspiracy of fear allowed those in a position to limit the appalling hunger and mortality to hide the truth. In Ethiopia it became impossible by late 1984, for the Ethiopian press to deny that there was a problem. But the press consistently stressed the drought rather than starvation. To this day, there must be many in rural Ethiopia and even some in the cities who know little of the awful death toll. The famine was effectively hidden. The contrast with India could not be more clear.

A further issue which should properly concern any investigation of the links between famine and censorship is the failure of the international donor community to fulfil the promises made in the wake of the catastrophic famines in Africa.

Following the devastating famine of 1972-4, a multi-nation conference was held in Rome. Henry Kissinger, at that time US Secretary of State, lent his

patronage to this gathering and made his famous statement "In ten years time no child will go to bed hungry". Ten years later a similar multi-nation conference was held following the 1982-5 Ethiopian famine. Amidst the analyses and the pledges, brave words were spoken about the need to tackle the problem of preventing famine in the future. But little enough had changed in the intervening decade to make Kissinger's pledge a reality.

There are thus two major actors in the censorship of famine. On the one hand, governments like those of Ethiopia, Sudan and China censor information on famine in order to protect the national pride, and more importantly to forestall any political challenges to the governments authority. These governments deliberately block effort to collect accurate and timely information as well as obstruct relief programmes. On the other hand, the international donor community fails to honour its pledges and, most importantly, fails to provide a forum in which the causes of re-occurring famine can be frankly discussed. This can and does lead to tragic loss of life.

The failure of the combined weight (and funds) of both the international meetings following the great Ethiopian famines is not due to the obstruction of host governments alone. It is also a failure on the part of the international donor community to generate, encourage and act upon information which, if they do not immediately have it, they certainly have the resources to commission. This too is censorship. The bureaucracies of the international relief and development agencies are often opaque but never more so than when they are required to act speedily in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives.

The most potent of these agencies, the World Bank, stated in its most recent (November 1989) report on Africa that the success of any long-term development in Africa depended on an increase in democracy and a freer flow of information. It is ironic that Amartya Sen's simple message on the central role of censorship as a cause of Africa's greatest scourge is only now becoming a subject for research, analysis and campaigning.

Frances D'Souza

Director, ARTICLE 19

April 1990

Endnotes

1. The *Scarcity Materials* have replaced the colonial *Famine Codes*. Interestingly, one of the major elements of the earlier *Famine Codes* was a complex famine early warning system which is given far emphasis in the *Scarcity Materials* precisely because the Press and other democratic institutions have taken over this role.
 2. A unit for measuring the energy value of food.
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Part 1: The Feast of Lies

CENSORSHIP IN CHINA'S FAMINE OF 1959-61

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, before the violent suppression of the spring demonstrations, BBC's Elizabeth Wright toured China to prepare a BBC radio documentary on the progress made in 40 years of the People's Republic. She was astonished by the degree of openness about the past. Yet she noted one very important exception. Her team had been promised a visit to one of the areas of Shandong province [see map, Fig.1] where the great famine of 1959-61 had driven whole villages into the forest to subsist on leaves and tree bark or to towns for what they could beg. When at last the visit was arranged local officials assured her that no famine had taken place, and that in fact those years had seen bumper harvests.¹

In spite of repeated campaigns against 'bourgeois liberal press freedom' in the wake of the 1989 democracy movement, one can still buy a plethora of popular journals devoted to personal reminiscences and documentary exposure of the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. In the comparatively permissive publishing climate before the spring and summer crackdown, not one of these journals dared to investigate the famine itself, and even conversational expressions have become censored by years of habit. Chinese who lost their whole families during the famine do not refer to the years 1959-61 as a 'famine': the common expression is *sannian kunnan*, or 'three difficult years'.

Today we know for a fact that this quiet understatement describes one of the greatest famines of modern times and certainly the most severe since the Revolution in 1949. It was a calamity which affected virtually the whole of China, cost at least 14 million lives and made the tenth anniversary of the

revolution one of the few years in recent Chinese history when the population actually decreased. Hideous phenomena, which the nation had put behind it in 1949, appeared again, province by province: traffic in sons and daughters, death by soil ingestion, and cannibalism - sometimes within the family.² The demographer Penny Kane, who has carried out an exhaustive study of the famine and is by no means hostile to the Chinese revolution, places 'excess mortality' between 14 and 26 million.³ The appalling death toll is no longer, as it was initially, an inflated and unprovable accusation by hardened anti-communists.

In May 1989 the Chinese Academy of Sciences National Affairs Analysis and Research Group published a report for internal consumption by the Chinese People's Consultative Conference on "Long term development problems in China's villages" which issued a 'conservative estimate' of fifteen million dead.⁴ Liu Binyan, the Chinese writer in exile who retains a loyalty to the Communist Party to which he once belonged, estimates the toll as high as 40 million.⁵

There is a lot we don't know: the exact death toll, the actual causes of death, the extent to which Party leaders were aware of the enveloping tragedy, the extent to which the famine was avoidable. Liu Shaoqi, then State Chairman, described it as "three-tenths natural disasters and seven-tenths human error", while Kane is inclined to the view that it was primarily a matter of natural disasters, though she believes that the work of nature was enhanced by the hand of man. One Chinese journalist, who survived the famine years eating corn cobs and tree leaves, reacted to my attempt to consider the link between the great famine and the great dearth of facts which surrounds it in these words:

"The truth about that period cannot be known by foreigners, and perhaps still less by ordinary Chinese. The world will have to wait a long time before we know exactly what happened. Perhaps the twenty-first century, perhaps longer".⁶

The *facts* given here are incomplete. Some of those which do appear in this report have been censored in China for thirty years; some are still only published in restricted circulation documents. One important source book

which describes the effect of the famine on a local scale - but avoids, as all public Chinese sources must, a national death toll - is now banned, and its author in exile for his involvement in the democracy movement. Another magazine which tentatively described the origins of the famine - but not its consequences - was forced to shut down immediately after doing so. In another book - a Chinese translation of a British historian's book - the nationwide death statistics are carefully omitted. With the exception of Kane's recently published work, there are virtually no books about the famine as such, even in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The information exists, but it is scattered and atomised in many different sources, as if the truth were too overwhelming for a single volume.

The point of these incomplete facts, the gaps in the record, is that censorship kills with impunity and on a vast scale. The Chinese famine was, at least in part, caused by a massive disinformation campaign waged by the government which led the nation to live beyond its means. It was also prolonged by censorship - by the attack launched against those who, at the crucial Lushan conference of the Politburo in July 1959, attempted to bring the economic crisis to light and to suggest a remedy. Attempts to cover up the fact of and final responsibility for the famine played a crucial role in the Cultural Revolution, which in turn played a crucial role in releasing selective information about the famine.

Censorship may not, in and of itself, cause famine. But it is as much a part of the pathology of famine as oedema, listlessness and death, and it was as much a part of the cause as droughts and floods.

The struggle for facts and for free exchange of opinion is an essential staple of the struggle against famine.

Endnotes

1. See Wright, 1989
 2. Source: private conversations, late 1989; also, Yang Zhongmei, 1989 p.152
 3. See Kane, 1988 & 1989
 4. *Cankao Ziliao* (Study Materials) published by Kexueyuan Kanjiu Ketizu (Chinese Academy of Sciences National Affairs Analysis and Research Group), No.5, May 1989
 5. Lin Bunyan, speech at L'Observatoire/RSF Conference, Montpellier, October 1989
 6. private conversation, late 1989
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THE FAMINE CONTEXT

The Land Living Close to its Means

China is a peasant nation living quite close to its means, with a huge segment of the world's population (one fifth) on a tiny percentage of its arable land (only about 8%). Mallory (1926) wrote that in the two millennia of well-recorded history, from 108 BC to 1911 AD, China experienced 1,828 famines, that is one a year occurring somewhere in the empire. Mallory's contemporary R.H. Tawney compares the position of the Chinese peasant to a man standing in water up to his neck: the slightest ripple, natural or man-made, might suffice to drown him.⁷ Before Liberation in 1949 the ruthless social polarisation of the countryside in China raised the danger-us tide of famine to chin level and higher.

In 1942, a 50 day local drought in Hunan Province cost three million lives, and only three years later a 52 day drought cost four million yes. Pre-Liberation Henan Province, traditionally one of China's worst famine bowls, provides a remarkable contrast with post liberation Henan. In 1942-3 Linxian County in Henan had 125 rainless days which caused something like three to ten million deaths; a fact strenuously denied at the time by the pre-Revolutionary Kuomintang government in Chongqing. Thirty years later, a drought of nearly twice that length caused scarcely a drop in production and no excess mortality, thanks to efficient resource mobilization based on reliable information.⁸

Social Justice and Famine Susceptibility

Land reform and co-operation in the years immediately following liberation were crucial factors which forced the famine tide to cede. But, contrary to the confidence of the authorities in launching the commune movement and the "Great Leap Forward"⁹ in 1958, the danger had not disappeared. For example, in Xinvang County, again in the famine bowl of Henan, one million people starved to death in the years 1959-1960, fully ten years after Liberation and land reform. The reason had more to do with the ambitions of the Party Secretary Wu Zhipu, who wildly inflated the production figures of the county, than with poor weather; the famine deaths began in the middle of a

bumper harvest).¹⁰ One crucial difference between 1942 and 1958 on the one hand, and the successful mobilizations against drought in 1972 and the 1982 drought in Hubei on the other, was accurate, reliable information. A further crucial reason for the successful famine prevention was the willingness on the part of the authorities to listen to and make use of information.

Was the Famine Caused by a Peasant 'Strike'?

The Soviet famine of the early 1930's was, as the Chinese and their Soviet advisors knew well, mainly due to a massive peasant 'strike' and sabotage, led by kulaks,¹¹ in response to forced collectivisation. It would be very convenient to attribute the Chinese famine to the same cause, coming as it did with the sudden introduction of the People's Communes during two months in late 1958. The facts are not so convenient: the combination of drought and flood, as bad as anything China had seen this century, was hardly the result of government policy. In addition, during the mid-fifties, the Chinese claimed to be learning from the Soviet experience of famine and were proceeding with their collectivisation slowly, on the basis of careful planning, reliable information and, above all, with the peasant's informed consent. There is good evidence that this is so in the grain production figures of the time which, before the distortions of the Great Leap Forward, were relatively reliable and reassuring.

In the early years of land reform, it was an easy matter for the hugely popular revolutionary government, relying on the support of land hungry peasants and agricultural labourers, to ascertain how much land was held and how much it could produce; the vast and bitterly poor majority had a heartfelt interest in supplying such information. Grain was freely traded on the open market according to the policy of the 'four freedoms' promulgated by Chairman Mao Zedong during the phase of 'New Democracy'. (These were "freedom to buy, sell or rent land; freedom to hire labour; freedom to lend money at interest; and freedom to set up private enterprises"). By 1953 these 'four freedoms' had led to renewed land concentration, usury, and, most worrying, serious speculation in grain.

In 1953, a State grain monopoly was formed; this reserved for the State the right to buy and sell grain, making it easy to supply the cities. City populations

were equipped with ration books allowing them to purchase grain. Rural populations were allowed to keep *kouliang* (mouth-grain), a percentage of the crop, for their own consumption, while the remaining 35% or so was sold to the state. This meant, however, that rural populations were bound to the land; they could not pack up and move to the cities, because they had no ration books. Mobility was one of the traditional defences of Chinese peasants in times of famine, particularly in famine bowl areas such as Hunan, Henan and Anhui provinces.

The State grain monopoly also meant that peasants had an interest in misleading the authorities about the quantity of their harvest; the more they harvested, the more they were required to sell to the State and the less they had for their own consumption. On the other hand, local officials had an interest in misleading higher authorities; under-reporting the harvest may have brought them favour with the peasants, but over-reporting it ingratiated them with higher officials.¹² At first, the disinformation engendered was a nuisance; later it became a fatal epidemic.

The 1953 decree setting up a monopoly in grain trade was also a form of coercion since it made individual farming much less attractive because one could no longer get better prices by marketing one's own crops and the only gains were by increasing yields. The scene was set for the co-operative movement. Co-operation in its first stage flourished beyond all expectation. In the earliest 'mutual aid teams', some of which comprised just a few families, only labour was pooled, while land, tools and the resulting crops were privately owned. Pooling labour allowed families with little labour power but good land (whose numbers had increased due to war and the land reform), to produce good crops with their neighbours' help. A higher stage of co-operation involved the formation of agricultural producers' co-operatives, which could be much larger in size. At first these concentrated on pooling land, in an effort to try to rationalise ploughing, to utilise the strips of land devoted to demarcation of plots and, above all, to avoid the endless disputes about whose land was to be ploughed or harvested first. The crop was then divided according to how much labour, land, and, occasionally, implements each peasant had invested, but the return was a percentage of the whole

crop, minus a portion sold to the State, rather than income on individual plots. Animals and implements were sometimes collectivised, but more often paid for by the collective on a contract basis.

The *“Model Regulations for an Agricultural Producers’ Co-operative”* was adopted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in 1956, and this defined an ‘advanced stage’ of co-operation, “entirely socialist in character”, in which no account was kept of how much capital in land, animals and implements had been pooled originally and the crop was divided solely according to the principle of “each according to his work”. An elaborate system of rating tasks in terms of work points provided the basis for apportioning the crop not sold to the State, as well as providing endless employment for accountants, and bottomless sources of rancour for the peasants.¹³

Outstanding Problems and Unsoothed Fears

Production improved at each stage of collectivisation. However, each stage created new problems: those families who were short on labour and long on land profited in the early Stages of collectivisation, but fell behind in later stages. Wealthier peasants did well in earlier stages, while poor and middle income peasants profited at later stages. Early co-operation did not require complex administration but provided no ‘accumulation funds’: later stages allowed for capital accumulation on a scale unthinkable for single families but necessarily created a small local bureaucracy of cadres “excused from productive duties” to manage the system.

This also introduced the problem of scale: early mutual exchange teams found it difficult to decide whose land to till first, much less which land to irrigate and how much to fertilise. It was impossible for them to work on large scale projects like irrigation works, sideline production and opening up new land for tillage. The later co-operatives found some of these projects practicable, but large scale schemes still interfered with the interests of neighbouring collectives.

Furthermore, the new systems following one after the other in the course of a few years brought uncertainty and doubt to peasants. However, the food producing co-operatives did have considerable successes. For all the

problems, the co-operatives delivered grain, slowly but surely. By the early 1950s, with the first co-operatives under way, China had *per capita* rice yields twice those of India. China's first five year plan, which began in 1953 at the time of the establishment of the State Grain Monopoly and ended in 1957 with a bumper crop, increased the value of agricultural production at an average of 4.5% annually. This in turn led to an increase in industrial output value by an average of 18% annually, and an increase in national income of 8.9% every year.¹⁴

Table 1,¹⁵ below, shows the success of collectivisation in terms of edible food output:

Year	Grain Output (incl. Tubers) Million catties*	Staples not sold to the State million catties	Per Capita (nationwide) catties
1950	249,400	46,638	370
1951	270,100	55,100	387
1952	308,800	55,584	436
1953	313,800	78,450	423
1954	320,900	83,434	412
1955	349,600	82,855	435
*Catty = Chinese unit of weight equivalent to 670 grams			

Table 1: Output of Staples - The State's and Peasants' Share Rising Expectations and Diminishing Returns

The modest progress in grain production from 1951 to 1955 was not reassuring for China's leaders and particularly for Mao. The increase in gross agricultural output as opposed to the value, was somewhere between 0.9% and 3.7% annually and had been achieved at the cost of an increase in investment of 5% per year. Any further increase in agricultural production would require a far greater investment. By 1955 China faced a dilemma of rising expectations and diminishing returns. Population growth, due to the

more stable environment, together with the increasing demand for raw materials to supply the new-found industries, created added pressure for large-scale collectivisation.

The Second Stage of Collectivisation

The second stage of collectivisation took place in 1955 and encountered stiff resistance from peasants. Many had previously only pooled their labour; now they were called upon to pool their newly received land, their draught animals and even their tools to a group that might have over a thousand members. Peasants who may have been willing to pool their material assets to a smaller, more recognisable village-level unit resisted the larger units. In every province some 10-20% of peasants found their income diminished by this second phase. In some areas, whole co-ops disbanded or peasants simply stopped farming.

The Precondition of Terror

Attempts to achieve unrealistic production quotas would require pressure on the peasantry. This kind of titanic economic coercion required, as a precondition, strict control of opinion as well as of information, lest the ruthlessly exploited peasants find urban defenders in the intelligentsia or in the party itself. "The enthusiasm of the masses must not be dampened," as Mao put it. Here, at least, the ground was well prepared.

During a very brief period in spring 1957, Mao, again attempting to 'learn from Stalin's mistakes', had advocated a policy of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" and encouraged intellectuals and lower party ranks to "rectify the party's style of work". Intellectuals all over China enthusiastically complied, putting up posters and criticizing local cadres. Appalled by the 'poisonous weeds' he found blooming in place of flowers, Mao quickly instituted an 'Anti-Rightist campaign', led by then party General Secretary Deng Xiaoping. Five hundred and fifty thousand of China's intellectuals (the official estimate was 300,000) were victimised, and those who did not criticise themselves or agree to extra-legal sanctions against themselves were dubbed counter-revolutionaries and imprisoned. It is impossible to say how many 'rightists' were executed, how many committed suicide, and how many died in prison, although almost any intellectual of that

generation can name people who 'disappeared'. People victimised as rightists have been a popular theme in Chinese cinema and novels since 1983.¹⁶

Mao, who cynically reconciled this purge with his earlier permissive policy by explaining that the 'hundred flowers' policy had been a ruse to "lure the snakes out of their holes," actually set a quota of 10% on 'rightist elements' to be weeded out. The 'quota' system for ferreting out rightists encouraged victimization of people for trivial reasons. One Chinese, victimised for discussing Khrushchev's 'secret speech' in November 1957 criticizing Stalin, told of friends labelled 'rightists' for writing wall newspapers about historical incidents in the Three Kingdoms Period (220-289 AD) and another because the local Communist Youth secretary coveted his girlfriend! The artist Cu Yuan was sent down to the countryside 'wearing a rightist hat', and required to paint murals. He was re-victimised during the Great Leap Forward for painting a mural of the local efforts to raise a million pigs in which the pigs were deemed too lean-looking.

Such was the atmosphere of mistrust the party created in 1957, that it was able to launch the Great Leap of 1958 without the slightest fear of reproach or, for that matter, honest grass-roots feedback. Small wonder that party and non-party intellectuals hesitated to criticise the Great Leap until it was too late. The climate of terror in which crop exaggerations, cover-ups, and eventually mass famine deaths spread, is defended to this day by the Government, though it is admitted that 'the campaign became seriously exaggerated' and in fact 98% of those labelled rightists were later rehabilitated.¹⁷

In addition to unquestioning obedience and party 'unity', another factor which has to be considered when trying to understand why the unrealistic goals of 1958 were set, is that a massive re-organisation of agriculture was necessary to provide the accumulation funds for industrial development. It was now necessary to mobilise labour power and to extract a grain surplus on a scale that the old, voluntary agricultural co-operatives were simply unable to meet. As early as 1955 Mao pointed out that:

"...in order to facilitate collectivisation, and in order to accumulate experience for the cadres and the masses, collectives of twenty or thirty are the majority. But these small collectives have little land and less capital funds, and they

cannot undertake large scale projects or mechanisation. This type of small co-operative blocks the development of productive forces; we cannot stop here too long".¹⁸

Endnotes:

7. Kane, 1988; Dando, 1982, p.1
8. Dando, 1982, p.19; Burchett and Alley, 1976, pp.216-17
9. An increase in the central planning of the economy and the massive development of industry, particularly steel production.
10. See Su Xiaokang, Luo Shishu and Chen Zheng, 1989, pp. 299-302. This book, formerly widely available on the mainland, has now been banned, and at least one of its authors is in exile.
11. Russian land-owning peasants
12. There are many excellent accounts of land reform, but one of the best, concentrating on how it was perceived and felt by ordinary peasants in a single Shanxi village, is that of William Hinton (1983, pp. 104-109), an agricultural advisor and farmer, in his two books *Fanchem* and *Shenfan*.
13. See Hinton, 1983, pp. 76-113, and a far less critical account in Burchett and Alley, 1976, p.20
14. MacFarquhar, 1983, p.2
15. Source: This is a composite of several tables from an article by T.C Lee, *The Food Problem*, in Kirby, 1961, pp. 9-11
16. See for example, the novels of Zhang Xianliang, and the films of Xie Jin
17. See, for example, Chen Xuewei, 1989, p. 5. There is actually a special dictionary published in Hong Kong which explains all the various slogans of those years in their historical context. Yu Ruxin, 1989, p.82
18. See Chen Xuewei, 1989, p55

COMMUNE EXCESSES AND SEEDS OF FAMINE

In April 1958, in Xinxiang County of Henan, a township called Qiliying set up something new; a gigantic, township-wide co operative comprising nearly ten thousand households which handled agriculture, small industrial projects, and even commerce, education and the People's Militia as a single unit, independent of the State. This was not a state farm, but almost a state within a state. This system was first referred to, in July 1958, as a "People's Commune", and the name stuck as soon as it was clear that Mao endorsed it. Other provinces were quick to respond, in word if not always in deed. Liaoning province, for example, merged its 9,600 small co-operatives into 1,461 gigantic ones, averaging 2,000 households, with nine as large as 10,000 and one reaching 18,000. June and July estimates of the summer wheat and paddy harvests were exaggerated to make this larger scale seem hugely profitable, long before the actual harvest. By the end of 1958 virtually every one in rural China belonged to a commune.¹⁹

The Inconvenience of the Press

Mao's endorsement of the communes, which he later admitted was premature, was independent of official party bodies and he later tried to blame the press. There are several versions of the story of a crucial slip by Mao, and in Mao's own version it consisted of a single word. During a tour of Shandong Province, a reporter had asked, "What about the People's Communes? Are they a good thing, or not?", and Mao replied with the single word "Good". Within a week the Beidaihe conference of the Politburo passed a resolution giving that single utterance a resounding official echo, and the next day (10 August 1958) *Renmin Ribao*, the official party paper, headlined "People's Communes are Good". Two months later, virtually the whole of China's peasants were organised into communes, at least theoretically.

Liu Shaoqi, another enthusiastic communitard, actually said that the Central Committee could only shoulder half the responsibility for the premature People's Commune adventure; the other half should be shouldered by *Renmin Ribao*. (In fact, the paper's support of the communes had been so tepid that Mao called it "a paper put out by imperial scholars and corpses").²⁰

Future Shock

The ambitious utopian social experiment was a profoundly disorienting experience for the ordinary peasant in several ways. Firstly, his fears about losing the land seemed to have come true. Suddenly he seemed to be at best a sharecropper or simple hired hand for a huge impersonal unit, far more remote - and sometimes more demanding - than the local landlord had ever been. In the four short months from August to November 1958, peasants were required to merge everything into gigantic conglomerations often comprising 25,000 people. Tired of the elaborate accounting of the co-operative movement, commune officials intended to pay the peasant a straight wage in cash or kind; work points were no longer used to differentiate between jobs or between able bodies and less able ones. More often, a huge segment of the investment came to the peasant in the form of commune services. Whereas the earlier 'advanced' and 'entirely socialist' stage of co-operation placed a premium on hard work and rewarded families with ample labour power, the

new commune system seemed to use such families to support everyone else, paying out cash, kind and services regard less of labour contributions.

Secondly, the peasant's fear for his livestock, savings, and personal effects now seemed justified. In some places bank deposits were simply confiscated in order to set up communal accumulation funds, and peasants were told that with all the necessities of life freely supplied and the rural markets now closed, they would have no further need for their life savings. Some officials actually confiscated bowls and chopsticks from people's homes when peasants showed reluctance to patronise the new public canteens.

Thirdly, there was an explicit militarization of labour, not only in the new military duties of the commune (of increasing urgency in the various war preparation campaigns which swept the country with the Taiwan Straits crises) but also in the special 'shock brigades'²¹ which were called on to "fight round the clock, eating and sleeping in the fields" during some construction campaigns. Most of this shock work must have seemed pointless to the peasant: what is the point if everybody gets the same part of the crop? Besides, much of it "[is] sparrows, poetry, steel... but what will we eat during the winter of '59?"²²

Not surprisingly, the peasantry became much less than acquiescent. Although the slaughter of draught animals did not reach the disastrous level of the Soviet collectivisation, many pigs were slaughtered before their season, and peasants everywhere gave new meaning to the old Maoist slogan "Dig tunnels deep; store grain everywhere, and never seek hegemony".²³ All of these disconcerting phenomena were to be multiplied beyond the peasants' wildest nightmares in the so-called 'Communist Wind' which swept China in the autumn of 1958.

'Inflating the Cowskin'

Even more bewildering were the new demands being placed on the peasant and on the soil, some of which were so ill-planned that the period just before the 'Communist Wind' became known as the 'exaggeration wind', or 'cow blowing wind'. 'Inflating the cowskin', to use the colourful Chinese expression, refers to blowing air under the skin of a slaughtered animal to simulate

fatness; it also accurately describes the way in which inflated harvest estimates were handed up from one layer of cadres to another in 1958. *Renmin Ribao* lists some of the estimated harvests for the early rice crop given in Jijy - Anxiang in Jiangxi province estimated 2,682 *catties*²⁴ per *mu*.²⁵ Lianban in Fujian province bid 3,000, but, within a week, two neighbouring communes had predicted 3,275 and 5,800. At the end of July a commune in Yingcheng, Hubei province, became the first to predict 10,000 catties per mu. On 13 August *Renmin Ribao* gave the fantastic figure of 36,900 catties per mu for a commune in Hubei's Macheng. The second crop estimates were even more incredible. Guangdong's Lianxian, a poor, mountainous region, predicted 60,437 catties per mu. An even more remote commune of the Tong minority in Huanjiang County of Guangxi estimated harvests of 130,000 catties per mu. Yet even in Tianjin, near Beijing, one unit claimed 124,329 catties per mu.²⁶ Deng Xiaoping was apparently duped into believing that 46.9 metric tonnes (70,000 catties) per mu was produced by one model worker, and the speech in which the then State Chairman Lii Shaoqi reveals this gullibility is still considered too sensitive for publication.²⁷ Hu Yaobang, writing in the youth journal of his native Henan province, claimed 35,393 catties of corn per mu, and an incredulous Zhu De was shown an experimental field in Guang dong Province which ostensibly produced a million catties per mu of yams. ²⁸ The peasants had a name for the brigades which issued these figures: "cowskin blowing satellites".²⁹ And of course there was a great deal of pressure to keep up with the 'satellites' as the party slogan put it: "One horse takes the lead, and ten thousand horses follow on".

The Central Committee resolution on the communes, forced through at the Beidaihe conference, dropped clear hints to lower cadres about the kind of estimates expected; MacFarquhar remarks that the resolution makes "chastening reading for any rural cadres who might suspect that they could boast increases of less, perhaps far less, than 100%".³⁰ As one Chinese intellectual put it:

"...each peasant knew how much they lied, but didn't have any idea of the total figure. The Central Authorities, on the other hand, had a total figure but hadn't the slightest idea how much of it was lies".³¹

The Fine Line between Credulity and Cynicism

The question is not really if the sort of yields the lower cadres estimated were possible; clearly they were not. The question is if they were ever really believable. Mao was, after all, the son of a rich peasant, and the top leadership had ample experience with the land and many knew its limits full well. Even if they did believe it, did no one tell them the truth? Hinton quotes Chen Yonggui, the peasant who was catapulted into the Politburo when his commune was lionised in the “Learn from Dazhai movement”:

“One brigade reported 33,000 catties per mu. Reports came in from a 1,000 catty county and a 10,000 catty commune. ...I thought, that kind of production, no matter how you study, even if you kill yourself, you can't get it. I'm not a *waihang* (a novice) I'm a peasant. I may not know much about other things but at least I know something about corn”.

Chen refused to manipulate the commune harvest figures and, as a result, was denied a special trip to Beijing to meet Chairman Mao, passed over in favour of less scrupulous cadres.

“One of the cadres tried to reason with me. He said ‘You shouldn't be so disgruntled. Those units have achieved things; that's why they were chosen’, He was a member of the old Party committee. I said, ‘It's all false’. ‘Don't say that’, he said. ‘You'll mess things up’. I knew him well, so I said, ‘Well, I'm only telling you. Don't tell anyone else’.³²

Liu Ruizhe offers two explanations for the apparently boundless credulity of the top leadership. One is an almost mystical faith in science. When some of Mao's colleagues asked how one could believe that a single mu could produce such an enormous crop, Mao replied that he had read an article in which a leading scientist said that most solar energy was wasted and that, if it were efficiently used, enormous yields were possible.³³ Sometimes, however, the scientific faith of those in Mao's circle smacked of obsequiousness and sycophancy. MacFarquhar even reports that a scientific cadre of the propaganda department claimed in a report to Mao, that if an apple were put inside a pumpkin the apple could grow as big as a pumpkin.”³⁴

The second explanation of cadre gullibility offered by Liu Ruizhe seems more substantial: “...the peasants did not dare tell the truth. Leaders naively

believed that they could understand the true situation by frontline visits. On April 20, Zhou Enlai, Peng Dehuai, and Xi Zhongxurt visited Zhengzhou Province's Hudun co-operative in Yanzhuang Township. Zhou asked how much the wheat fields produced per mu and the district agricultural vice-secretary Du Dexin answered '700 catties'. Zhou Enlai replied 'What you cadres say doesn't count'. He then turned to the model worker Bao Youde, 'You've got experience, how much do you think you'll produce this year?' Bao answered '700 catties'. Zhou then said 'If the old man says its true, it must be true'. But perhaps Zhou and the other cadres did not consider the fact that such statistics had already been long set and publicised by the local cadres, and the peasants could not possibly 'speak carelessly' on this subject. The credulity of peasants at the mercy of censorship and disinformation is readily understandable. But those in power must have been aware of the distortions of information that their authority created. Years of experience with unscrupulous cadres must have taught them that the custom of 'inflating a cow's skin' was endemic in the peasant bureaucracy and epidemic in times of national mobilisation. It is very difficult to imagine naiveté on the part of the top leaders, particularly in the later stages of the disaster. In March of 1959 after the Zhengzhou conference at which Mao admitted the problem of 'cow-blowing' cadres, Deng Xiaoping sent instructions to the *Xinhua* news agency to collect special information for the Central Committee about commune affairs, a remarkable admission that the Central Committee's own sources were unreliable.³⁵

The Size of the State's Share

Not only were peasants expected to produce incredible amounts but the percentage they had to hand over to the State increased. The communes were not entirely independent of the State; they had to sell their crop to it and pay taxes also. According to an article in *Dangshi Yanliu Ziliao* (Party Affairs Research Materials), the percentage of crop peasants had to turn over to the state rose from an average of 27% during the first five year plan to 29.4% in 1958 and then to 39.7% in 1959. In addition, communes had to pay a straight agricultural tax equal to 15% of the 1958 harvest. There is evidence that, at least initially, the tax rate was far higher. Peng Shuzhi, a founding member of

the Communist Party, writes that, in the haste to set them up, no quota of tax was fixed for the communes and that as a result many communes paid 30% or more in taxes to ingratiate themselves with the State. He cites the Sui County 'Red Star' commune in Guangdong as an example, paying 30% of its harvest in tax. He remarks that the prices for sales to the State were often set with the same kind of 'voluntary' system.³⁶

In some areas this amounted to turning over 80% of the crop to the State, which is equal to the very highest rates being paid under the serf system then existing in Tibet:³⁷

But the 'exaggeration wind' which local cadres participated in made the situation far worse. Since the State share of the harvest was based on estimates made by local cadres and not on the actual harvest in hand, the entire harvest was sometimes not enough to fulfill the 30-40% that the State expected to buy, not to mention the 15% tax. Hinton recalls revisiting the village where he had spent the land reform years and asking about the 'wind of exaggeration'. In 1958, thanks to the inflated estimates of the coming harvest given to the state grain purchasing authority, the village was asked for an additional 30,000 catties of grain. Villagers bargained this down to 15,000, but even this proved to be impossible, and in the end the State had to supply the village with some 40,000. Hinton's village was lucky. The local cadres did not always dare ask for relief, and if they did, they did not always get it.³⁸

The Withering 'Communist Wind'

In 1958 a total of 25 billion yuan³⁹ in property was collectivised, and the result, according to material published for use in the Central Committee cadre school in 1981, was dead cows, destroyed homes, and implements hidden or wrecked rather than turned over to the commune. In one county, each peasant lost fifty to a hundred yuan in property, which was an average annual or biannual income for a peasant. Nationwide the so-called Great Leap of late 1958 is said to have destroyed between 20% and 30% (11 the nation's productive capacity. In the last four months of 1958 some 90 million men were mobilized for non-agricultural work, principally smelting steel, and it was estimated that some 10 billion work days were entirely wasted.⁴⁰ A massive, state-inspired rural flight occurred which, as one Chinese demographer put it

was "in flagrant violation of objective economic laws". The urban work force increased, in the years 1958 to 1960, from 31 million to 50 million, while the peasantry was cut by 23 million, so that in the years 1961 to 1962, 20 million people had to be sent back to the countryside to make up the huge, artificially created labour deficit. It has been estimated that in many areas the steel drive took up 40% of the nation's labour power; in some areas it was 60% and more.⁴¹

Within the newly created communes, a system called 'levelling and transferring' was used whereby richer communities were expected to provide labour and goods to poorer ones. Resources from the richer production teams were transferred to the commune to create the 'Commune Accumulation Funds'.

Endnotes

19. Chen Xuewei, 1989, p. 50, p. 55; MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 77-78
20. See Yang Zhongmei, 1989, p. 156
21. The duty of the shock brigades was to galvanise labour in the communes and for industry.
22. See Bennett, 1978, p.12; also Liu Ruizhe, 1989, p.91
23. See especially Gittings, 1989, p. 29; also Kane, 1988, p. 41-2
24. A Chinese unit of weight, equivalent to 0.67 kg or 1.47 lbs
25. A *mu* is a Chinese measurement of area, equivalent to 1/6th of an acre,
26. Liti Ruizhe. 1989, p. 84; Chen Xuewei, 1989. p. 59; see also MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 127
27. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 127
28. See Yang Zhongmei, 1989, pp. 150-151
29. MacFarquhar. 1983, p. 198
30. MacFarquhar, 1983. p. 86
31. Private conversation, late 1989
32. Hinton, 1983, 234-5
33. Liu Ruizhe, 1989, p.85 8
34. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 127
35. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 163
36. See Peng Shuzhi, 1980, p.205
37. See *Dangshi Yanjiu Ziliao*, No.9. 1988, article by Liu Shuinian; see also Burchett and Alley, 19976, p. 24
38. Hinton, p. 147-8
39. Chinese unit of currency
40. *Nongye Jitihua Zongyao Huibian* (A collection of documents on agricultural collectivisation), Vol. 2, the Central Committee Cadre School Publishing House, June 1981; see also Chen Xuewei, 1989, p.58
41. See Lui Qu, 1989, p.126

THE LAND LIVING BEYOND ITS MEANS

The 'Communist Wind' also encouraged ordinary people to live well beyond their means. Nationwide public dining halls were established in the

communes, as an attempt to free women from the drudgery of preparing food for their families. In many places, a system of 'eat without paying' was also instituted, and Hinton wrote that "If there was one facet of the Great leap that everyone remembered, it was the food". He quotes one peasant as saying "We ate a lot of meat. It was considered revolutionary then to eat meat. If you didn't eat meat it wouldn't do. At New Year, we got ten catties (6.7 kg) of meat and assigned each family the task of eating that quota. People even vied with each other to see who could eat the most".⁴²

Some communes went far beyond free food and attempted to provide the 'seven guarantees'; free food, clothing, housing, education, medicine, funeral expenses, hair cuts, and even operas, fuel for heating, and marriage expenses. Such gifts were paid out of the commune accumulation fund. In Chengnan Commune in Heilongjiang Province this amounted to about 48% of the total commune income. If one considers the taxes paid and the proportion of the harvest sold to the State at low prices, it is clear that very little was left for individual distribution.

Actual and Estimated Harvests

The bumper crop of 1958 was about 200 million tonnes, counting soya beans: not quite as high as the 350 million (later in 1958 reduced to 260 million) tonnes the authorities announced, but certainly a bumper crop. Much of the surplus was wasted in the new dining halls or on feeding the steel workers, and the year 1958 actually ate into rather than added to national grain reserves. Furthermore, the yield had been due to good weather and above all the intensive use of labour. Much was made of the various methods used, deep digging, for example, in which entire fields were turned over shovelful by shovelful to a depth of a foot or more. A survivor reports 'deep digging' fields to depths of two and even three feet, but many of the depths reported for deep digging were as spurious as the yield estimates.⁴³ This method became popular after Mao had read an article by the party secretary of Changke County of Henan and urged its adoption nationwide. However, no scientific evidence was asked for or provided to back up Mao's belief.⁴⁴

Then there was the technique of the double-wheel twin-bladed plough. These ploughs were invented in north China, where the soil is flat and dry. During a

brief attempt to popularise them in 1956, some 800,000 were made and distributed, but were unpopular in the south of the country, where plots are small and very wet. The Minister of Agriculture, Liao Luyan, is said to have denounced the pretentious invention as “planting onions in a pig’s nose to make the pig look like an elephant”. In January 1958, Mao appeared in a photograph on the front page of Renmin Ribao posing with one, and then even Liao Luyan had to promote them. Rehabilitation of the plough was transformed into ‘an ideological problem’ at the Chengdu Conference of early 1958.

Overuse of seed was another widely advocated technique, which led to the squandering of seed grain, and literally burying large amounts of what should have been next year’s supply. It is now well established that sowing more than 28 catties of seed per mu diminishes returns. T. C. Lee reports the bitter experience of Luoan County in Anhui. In this county, 20 catties of seed yields approximately 670 catties of grain. If seeding is increased to 28 catties the yield is greater (988 catties) but so too is the number of non-bearing stalks. This trend results in a net decrease in yield the greater the amount of land sown.⁴⁵

Another example is the ‘10,000 mu square technique’, the failure of which Hinton describes in a chapter of that name in his book Shenfan (Digging deep).⁴⁶ The idea was to concentrate all the good fertiliser and labour on a single, contiguous, flat square of fine land, and accomplish more grain output with less land, faking maximum advantage of the new communes’ ability to pool labour and resources. Even where successful, this technique quickly ran up against the problem of diminishing returns. And of course large areas of the country simply had no such expanses of good land. But, as Chen Yonggui remarks, it was impossible for peasants to stand up against the winds of disinformation and intimidation sweeping the land. Compliance or passive resistance were the only realistic options available.

Mao’s ‘Three Thirds’ Plan

Lack of reliable information about the causes and limits of the 1958 crop led Mao, amongst others, to assume that 1958 was a qualitative and not simply a quantitative improvement on 1957. Furthermore, he apparently believed that

the good harvest was due to revolutionary social organisation and scientific techniques which could be extended almost indefinitely, nationwide, producing similar increases year after year. This error, the product of his own tyrannical control of truth, led him to a disastrous decision: to attempt a drastic reduction in the area China had under cultivation.

At the August 1958 Politburo conference at Beidaihe, which confirmed the commune movement and launched the steel disaster, Mao suggested that a third of the arable land should be used for intensive cultivation of the '10,000 mu square' type, another third afforested, and the last third left fallow. This plan meant decreasing the area China had under cultivation - already one of the lowest, per capita, in the world - by over a third, since China, particularly in the south, leaves much less than the traditional one-third of the land fallow, relying on intensive use of fertiliser, especially manure, to diminish soil fatigue.

Under the now-established 'Great Leap' methods, quotas for cultivation reduction were drawn up and handed down to the provinces. Shanxi, for example, would decrease cultivation by nearly a third, while Inner Mongolia and Qinghai cut back by 21%. Fortunately, other provinces cut back more modestly, and no province complied with the full amount called for.

Nationwide, however, the area sown in grain reduced by 6 million hectares in 1958 and another 11.6 million in 1959, the first famine year.⁴⁷ The planners ordered another 5% reduction in acreage sown, resulting in a reduction of 25 million tonnes of grain. The procurement quotas remained extremely high, since they were based on the assumption that decreasing the acreage would actually increase yields. In 1959 the State purchasing share stood at some 45.4 percent of output, leaving far too few calories in the villages.

Nevertheless, a goal of 525 million tonnes was set for the year 1959, double the official, and more than double the actual 1958 figure.

Steel by Numbers

In August 1958, Mao decided that the communes could be declared a victory and handed over to subordinates whilst he turned his attention to a perceived lagging-behind of industry, in particular, the steel industry. China's goal was to become the world's third largest steel producer by 1960 and surpass the UK

and the US within five years. In July 1958 only a few hundred thousand people were involved in the steel drive, by October there were 60 million and by the end of 1959 the figure was 90 million. Much of the industry consisted of backyard steel furnaces. Between July and November 1959 a million of these furnaces flourished. But even before the disastrous labour shortage this created in the autumn harvest became apparent, the steel drive began to collapse. In 1960, the worst famine year, China produced 18 million tonnes of steel, at a cost of millions of lives, but little of this output was usable, due mainly to an inadequate transport network, or even, in the long term, sustainable. By 1962, levels of production were down to seven million tonnes.⁴⁸

It is easy to see why one of the early commune slogans was the 'militarization' of labour. Leaders cynically manipulated the apparently inexhaustible human resources at their disposal. In a single year - a bumper harvest year - the rural labour force was physically reduced by over 20%, and the labour which did stay on the land was seriously distracted from farming duties. MacFarquhar remarks, "On average, a peasant who had to look after 8.8 mu in 1957 now had to cultivate 11 mu, and since the number of draught animals had dropped sharply - presumably slaughtered at the time of the formation of the communes in fear of confiscation - the work was even harder". When it became clear that the transfer of 90 million people from agriculture to steel smelting was more than agriculture could possibly afford, the State Planning Commission sent 20 million back to the fields on an emergency basis. Mao's reaction was "We have twenty million people at our beck and call; what other political party could have done it?"⁴⁹

The Peasant Reaction

Were the food shortages of late 1958 caused by mass peasant resistance? Many cadres, and even Mao himself, speculated that most of the harvest was being hidden by the peasants for their own consumption. Obviously, the peasants had ample grievances for a Soviet style 'strike' against the Great Leap and the Commune movement; Minister of Defence Peng Dehuai, a firm opponent of both the militarization of labour and the diversion of the military by the Leap, later wrote that "if it weren't for the sheer goodness of the

Chinese worker and the Chinese peasant, we would have had a Hungarian situation on our hands”, referring to their 1956 revolution.⁵⁰

There was undeniably some resistance: people stayed away from the communal kitchens in droves, and Peng Shuzhi quotes the Guangzhou Yangcheng Wanbao of 20 December 1958 as saying that peasants in Guangdong headed for the cities to avoid the communes.⁵¹ Nanfang Ribao describes heavy eating and drinking, hiding property, and slaughtering of domestic animals as resistance to the communes.’ At the very least, the peasantry grew tired. On November 9 *Renmin Ribao* warned people not to work more than 48 hours at a stretch, and to get at least six hours sleep if they did.⁵²

There was no mass revolt. On the contrary, the Chinese peasant, called on to accomplish superhuman tasks, accomplished them, mobilizing vast internal reserves of tenacity, forbearance, and sometimes even enthusiasm as evidenced by the 1958 bumper crop. By the time the Politburo met in Beidaihe in August it was obvious that the summer harvest would be 69% up on the previous year.⁵³ Hinton reports that many peasants to this day look back on the Great Leap with nostalgia, especially for the food. As Hinton points out, the communal dining halls did fulfil a need, albeit imperfectly.⁵⁴ Despite the price peasants had to pay, the communes did articulate a vision of communist plenty with which peasants could readily identify, a vision that resembled the hopeful posters of plenty put on peasant doors every New Year. One Henan cadre, Zhang Guozhong, spoke at a mass meeting in these terms:

“What is communism? It is like a big cart, pulled by draught animals which belong to us all, filled with food, new housing, rubber, machinery, and so on. Except for the things you use and borrow for yourself, everything else belongs to us all. Is communism good?”

The peasants answered thunderously, with an unconscious echo of the Chairman’s original wish-command:

"Good!"⁵⁵

Dizzy with Excess

Faced with food shortages, the bureaucracy refused to entertain the possibility that the grain they had ‘estimated’ into existence still did not exist.

The complacent belief that the new communes could provide indefinite increases in yield became stubborn, implacable, and even a little unhinged. Mao, for example, had the following surreal conversation with Zhang Guozhong about a new commune in his province.

“You have 310,000 people here in this county, and you’ve just harvested 110,000 catties⁵⁶. How can you eat all that? What will you do with the surplus?”

Zhang was at a loss for words, perhaps because he was less at a loss for facts than the Chairman, but an accompanying cadre suggested trading it for machinery. Mao replied that with everyone producing so much grain, nobody would be willing to trade. Another cadre suggested making alcohol, and Mao replied that if everyone did that there would be too much alcohol. Receiving no reply, Mao laughed:

“Actually, it is good to have too much grain. If the country doesn’t want it, if nobody wants it, eat it yourself. Eat five meals a day! Next year you can reduce the acreage, only work half the day, and spend the rest on study. Learn some science, study culture, and open a university or a high school...” His interlocutors laughed. This conversation took place in August 1958, and yet by November, people in Henan were dying of starvation.⁵⁷

The vision of plenty spread by the leaders had undoubted popularity; Mao and agricultural chief Tan Zhenlin organised massive feasts to celebrate the good harvest. No credit whatsoever was given the good weather; thus no qualification or limit was put on the following year’s harvest. Deng Xiaoping declared that “We can harvest as much as we want,” and predicted that per capita grain distribution would be 625 kg in 1958, 1,050 in 1959 and 2,500 kg in 1962.⁵⁸ Instead, the annual grain ration went from 203 kg to 163.5 kg nationally between 1957 and 1960. The decrease was only about 1.7% in urban areas, from 263 kg to 258 kg but it was 23.7% in the rural areas, from 274 kg to only 209 kg.⁵⁹ Table 2, below, shows how huge was the gap between the published predictions and the actual availability of grain, although the leaders were protected from their larger follies by friendly editors, and there are, consequently, a few gaps.⁶⁰

	Grain Output			Grain Ration	
	(including soya beans) million tonnes			kg per head	
Year	Predicted	Claimed	Actual	Predicted	Actual
1958	350.0	375.0	200.0	625	198.0
1959	525.0	281.55	170.00	1,105	186.5
1960	307.0*	-	143.5	-	163.5

Table 2: **Predicted and actual grain harvests**

Endnotes:

42. Hinton, 1983, p219
43. See, for example, Hinton, 1983, p. 245 and p.247
44. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 124
45. Kirby, 1961, p.16
46. Hinton, 1983, pp. 241.7
47. MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 125-7
48. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 327; Chen Xuewei, 1989, p.58
49. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 328 and p.335
50. See Yang Zhongmei, 1989, p. 161
51. Peng Shuzhi 1980, p. 195
52. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 120
53. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 82
54. Hinton, 1983, p. 232
55. Liu Ruizhe, 1989 p. 91
56. Equivalent to 0 24 kg per person
57. Liu Ruizhe, 1989, p. 84; Su Xiaohang et al, 1989, p.300
58. MacFarquhar, 1983 3, p.121
59. Adapted from Zhonggno Kexueyuan Chubanshe 1987
60. Sources: Rodzinski, 1988 p.66, MacFarquhar. 1983, p. 328-329 and *(1960 figure of 307.0) from article by Li Fuchun, in Kirby, 1961, p. 157

THE ARTIFICIAL DEARTH OF FACTS

The very fact that famine followed so closely on a bumper crop indicates that it was probably not attributable to a 'peasant strike' or to vagaries of the weather. The food shortages of late 1958 can only be explained as the wages of mass deception, self-deception, and gross mismanagement. But how is such mass deception and self-deception possible? And why wasn't it self-correcting? How can the leaders of a planned economy consistently predict

grain output that is twice the actual harvest year after year? How could cadres convince themselves that their unreachable targets were being met? And if they could not, how could they convince themselves that it was in the national interest to say they were? Could they really hope to convince the peasants that their grain rations were doubling and trebling when in fact they were declining by nearly a quarter?

A Chinese journalist posed the question differently: the problem, as he put it, was a planned economy which ran in a single direction - plans passing from top to bottom. There was no reliable feedback whatsoever from bottom to top, nothing to indicate that the plans were unreasonable and the targets unreachable. On the contrary, the lower cadres understood that promotion depended on handing in the expected estimates. Furthermore, they understood that inflated estimates were well appreciated by officials, and the chance that they would be checked was remote. Those officials further inflated the estimates, until by the time they reached the topmost levels where power was concentrated they no longer bore any resemblance to reality. These distortions describe the operation not only of the campaign to increase grain output, but also the steel campaign, the 'Four Pests' ⁶¹ campaign, and even the folk song writing campaign', and they explain why they all quickly became detached from reality. This journalist, who survived the famine but fell victim to the campaign against those who warned against it expressed the state of information in the following chart:

[CHART TO FOLLOW]

As the diagram in Fig. 2, opposite, makes clear, the deception was not simply due to isolation. There was contact between the various segments of the leadership and even between the leaders and the grass roots, Mao was, after all, a firm believer in visiting grass roots and front lines, and he regularly circumvented the Party apparatus in Beijing and went travelling in the provinces for months on end. Other members of the Politburo did the same, though with rather different results. In addition, Mao often organised reunions of regional and local cadres on his travels, quite independently of the Politburo. By late 1958, the entire Politburo, including Mao, was well aware

that severe food shortages existed, and Mao actually took the side of the peasants against the local cadres who searched counties for concealed grain'. Mao also received accurate information from his immediate entourage: Chen Yun, then head of State finances, noted in early 1959 that grain stocks were depleted and, most important of all, Peng Dehuai and Zhang Wentian, both senior Party officials, raised the critical state of the countryside at the historic Lushan meeting in July 1959. But in the atmosphere of censorship and disinformation, the factual content of these reports and their implications for policy were less important than the challenge to power and prestige that they posed. "Contact," explains the Chinese journalist who drew up this chart, "is not enough. For effective feedback you need the free debate and exchange of opinion, not simply the flow of information".

Endnotes:

61. A campaign to encourage vigilance against crop-destroying pests.

WARNINGS OF STARVATION

In October 1958, a teacher living in Xiamen, a city on an island generally plentifully supplied with seafood, wrote: "For months we have not tasted a catty of meat or a single piece of fish. Everybody is in the same situation. Nothing edible is procurable".

Another writer noted:

"People fight each other to get to the rice barrels first, but there is never enough".

Another said:

"The present situation is frightening because there is nothing for sale; there is nothing to eat when we are hungry... Everybody is suffering. Everything is gone".

Overseas Chinese began to receive letters from their relatives in south China telling them not to send any more money, since it would only be confiscated for the commune 'investment' fund. Partly for this reason, Fujian and Guangdong Provinces began to take note of the food problem and the exhausted condition of the peasantry. Tao Zhu, Guangdong Party Secretary,

reiterated the importance of the eight hour day; his wife published an editorial on the subject in *Renmin Ribao*, and his secretary, future Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, ordered reform of work schedules, better canteens and a halt to confiscation of houses, clothes, furniture and savings.⁶²

Mao on his Guard

Mao was not wholly insensitive to the food shortages his policies had reaped; he manoeuvred adroitly to distance himself from responsibility for the excesses of the 'Communist Wind' and to use them against potential enemies and even embarrassing allies. Mao read Zhao Ziyang's Xuwen report and Tao Zhu's similar report on Humen, arid at a conference in Zhengzhou on March 5 1959 at tacked them - for their search for hoarded grain. He also attacked the pace-setting Henan County for taking 70% of rural income from the peasants; 7% in tax, 26% in commune accumulation, 20% in production expenses, and 17% to support administration and welfare.

Some of the most damning statistics on the 'Communist Wind' and the Great Leap come from Mao's rather disingenuous attacks on his colleagues at Zhengzhou. He told of food shortages in grain, oil, pork and vegetables worse than any since Liberation and noted that the State purchasing targets for grain, cotton and oil had not been met. "last year's bumper harvest paralysed us," he said, and spoke of communes in Shanxi where 3,000 people did no work at all or only worked 50% of the time, and another in Hubei which had lost 10,000 members during the 'communisation' of pigs and poultry. He warned especially of exaggerations and lies, and disparaged the official statistics on the industrial workforce, but insisted that it was too large anyway and some 20% should return to the countryside to farm the land. He also denounced the policy of transferring wealth from rich brigades to finance poor ones or commune activities, as "cutting off the heads of the rich and handing them to the poor". He even labelled himself a 'right opportunist', ending with the ironic call to "firmly implement right opportunism thoroughly and to the end. If you don't follow me, then I'll do it on my own."⁶³

By July 1959 the crisis had developed to the point where it was no longer a matter of posture or policy, but of power.

Further Warnings

This extraordinary 'right opportunism' by Mao, and his professed concern for the peasant's measure of grain, must have thoroughly confused many of those close to him. But it is easily understandable if the evident gravity of the food shortage is considered. The economy was plummeting and Mao had to do something. In April 1959 Chen Yun, head of State Finances, reported to his department:

"...the estimates of last year's summer and autumn harvests were too high, and too much was consumed. In this year, the consumption of grain in the cities and countryside continues to rise so that our stocks are depleted. Every where there will be shortages. The problem of food has yet to be solved in our country".

A month later, in a letter to Mao he gave the reason: the steel campaign..⁶⁴

The most dire warnings came from the leaders' peasant roots. In the first six months of 1959 both Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai visited the same county, Flunan, in the course of home visits. For both, it was the first trip home in 30 years, and an opportunity to see with their own eyes how the country was implementing the 'three red flags' (the increased centralisation of the economy, the Great Leap and the communes). For one of them, it was a sycophantic journey which is still immortalised by the museums which seemed to spring up over his every footprint. For the other, Peng Dehuai, it was a revelation which crashed down on his conscience and eventually obliterated his career.

The Case of Peng Dehuai

Peng, Red Army founder, Long March veteran, and Korean War hero, had tremendous prestige in the Party and especially in the army, equalled only by his dogged loyalty to Mao. He also, as the son of a poor peasant who had seen his own brother starve to death while begging to support the family, stood closer to the peasantry than most of the central leadership. In October 1958, during a visit to China's poorest Province, Garisu, he became appalled at the excesses of the steel campaign and the neglect of the crops. At one point he found corn abandoned on the ground and sought the reason. The old peasant he finally found told him that everybody was too busy with the 'backyard steel furnace'. Peng remonstrated:

“Hasn’t any one of you given a thought to what you will eat next year if you don’t bring in the crops? You’re never going to be able to eat steel!”

and received the reply:

“True enough; who would disagree with that? But except when the centre sends down a high-ranking cadre, who can stand up against this wind? (that is, the ‘Communist Wind’)”..⁶⁵

Peng’s trip to Hunan was even more of a revelation. At one iron foundry, he found brigade workers melting down pots and pans to produce melted iron, and likened the job to beating a gong with a cucumber. Confronting local cadres with boasts of 8,000 catties per mu yields, he was at last told by a county secretary that only a very few fields could produce 800, at most.

In his home village of Niaoshi, Peng met old friends obviously in dire need of food who showed him the meagre ration of a few grains of rice. According to MacFarquhar (but the Chinese translator of his book disputes the authorship) Peng bitterly penned the following poem:⁶⁶

*The millet is scattered all over the ground
The leaves of the sweet potato are withered
The young and the strong have gone to smelt iron
To harvest the grain there are children and old women
How shall we get through the next year?
I shall agitate and speak out on behalf of the people!*

Fulfilling this poem’s pledge must have taken a large measure of Peng’s courage. Chinese who lived through that period remark that one did not feel free to criticise a Mao policy even in private conversations. The Party Secretary of Hunan, Zhou Xiaozhou, confirmed this. When Peng asked him about the correctness of the steel drive, Zhou, although he knew the truth and was quite confident of a sympathetic hearing, simply could not bring himself to criticise a Mao policy, even in private. Yet both he and Peng would eventually do so to Mao’s face, at Lushan.⁶⁷ And the price of truth was death.

Endnotes

62. MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 138-9

63. See MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 146-56

64. Yang Zhongmei 1989 p.153

65. Kane, 1988, p.48

66. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 200;

67. MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 197-200

THE LUSHAN CONFERENCE 1959

Peng Dehuai did not confine his indignation to poetry, but he couched it in diplomatic terms in his now famous private letter to Mao during the Lushan Conference of July-August 1959. The letter remarked that there had been 'gains and losses' in the leap. But, said Peng,

"The wind of exaggeration has become relatively wide spread, and touched every area and every department. There are many unreal and absurd reports even in the newspapers. These have cost the party a great deal in prestige. Secondly, petty bourgeois frenzy has forced us into a position where it is easy to commit 'left' errors. Wishes become targets which must be achieved within a year for a few months. Because these targets are divorced from reality, they cannot get the support of the masses".⁶⁸

According to Peng, Mao had the private letter copied and distributed to the meeting. With the obvious justice of his cause and the prestige of his person, Peng managed to draw three members of the meeting to his side: Zhou Xiaozhou, Huang Kecheng and Zhang Wentian. Mao paused artfully, to see if any others would support Peng; after all, in many ways Peng was merely reiterating what Mao had said at Zhengzhou. But now the issue was power, not policy, and Mao hit back, accusing Peng of "right opportunism and distributed his letter as evidence of an anti-party 'military club' (Peng was then Minister of Defence, and Huang was also a military man). At one point Mao threatened, 'if you, the Liberation Army don't wish to follow me, I will seek out a Red army, but I think the PLA will follow me', The PLA did; Lin Biao, the architect of the Mao cult in the Cultural Revolution eventually took Peng's post.

The Lushan summit saw the demise of Peng Dehuai and within a few months of the summit, a new Leap forward was launched. The commune policy was reiterated and State Party Chairman Li Fuchun, described economic policy for 1960 (which was to be the nadir of the famine), as a 'continued Leap forward'. Pessimists or non-enthusiasts were equated with counter-revolutionaries,

bad elements and bureaucrats. Mao added 'the struggle which has surfaced at Lushan is a class struggle. It is the most vital life anti death struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the past ten years of socialist revolution'⁶⁹

It was not simply fear which allowed Mao to win at Lushan The Chinese Communist Party had more than its share of communists like Peng unafraid of death; their record in the Revolution shows that, Some, for example Peng and Zhang Wentian, who both eventually recanted, considered that the prestige of Mao was so essential to the party that it mattered more than the justice of their case. Others, like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, were themselves implicated in the very worst excesses of the Great Leap. Still others, like Zhou Enlai, sided with Mao out of loyalty, The vast majority of party members, however, went along with the travesty at Lushan because they had no choice. No one was told of the downfall of Peng, and the reasons for it only leaked out slowly, through a fierce campaign of slander against "hypocrites, pessi mists, fellow travellers, right opportunists, and military adventurers", In 1974, Peng died as a result of years of sometimes violent interrogation and imprisonment. His few years out of prison, just before the Cultural Revolution, were spent under virtual house arrest, studying and doing agricultural experiments to prove to himself that the yields claimed during the Great Leap were impossible. At first his peasant neighbours, who remember the enormous peaches he grew during the famine years, did not even know who he was. Zhang Wentian and Zhou Xiaozhou met more or less the same fate; when Zhang Wentian died his wife was not allowed to inscribe his real name on his tomb.⁷⁰

Endnotes:

68. See Yang Zhongmei 1989, p.154

69. Yang Zhongmei 1989, p.154

70. MacFarquhar, 1983, p 235-6; Rodzinski, 1988. p. 72; Yu Ruxin, 1989, pp. 210-12

“After the autumn of that year (1959),” writes Su Xiaokang (1989), “the second Communist Wind’ blew up and brought utter mad ness. This was even worse than 1958, for any local cadre who could not make the quota was labelled a little Peng Dehuai’ and treated as badly as a landlord during the land reform. Peasants who did not turn over their grain were tied up and hung”. Henan led the way: in one commune, Guidian, a secretary named Liu Wencai tied and strung up forty peasants during an anti-concealment drive. Four died. At Hushan Commune a particularly active Youth member and Party Committee member beat 92 people, of whom a further four died. In Xinyang the local authorities arrested 1,774 people in the wake of the Lushan meeting. Thirty-six of these died in custody. Another 10,720 were ‘temporarily detained’, and 667 of these died. The ‘anti-concealment’ drive extended to seed grains so that there was no grain to plant and for eighty days, until spring 1960, there was no crop at all. During this period, the district secretary Lu Xuanwen, well known for his connection with the earliest brigades which had received praise from Mao himself, stressed that “It is not that there is no food. There is plenty of grain, but 90% of the people have ideological problems’.

In November of 1959, Secretary Lu of Unnan was being driven home from Huangchuan County and noticed a large number of corpses on the road, as well as some children’s corpses being carried by starving parents. He immediately issued orders to the local security bureau to stop the “influx of vagrants”. While the police were attempting to carry out this order, however, more than a million people in Xinyang died of starvation. Xixian county had a hundred thousand deaths, and 639 villages entirely disappeared. The three counties of Huangchuan, Guangshan and Xixian left more than 12,000 orphans. In Henan province alone more than two million died of starvation, 740,000 animals perished, and nearly four and a half million mu of land was abandoned, More than 1.6 million homes were demolished or deserted.

Anhui Follows Henan

Anhui's provincial Party Secretary Zeng Xisheng was, like Wu Zhipu, a Mao supporter, and Anhui shared with Henan the distinction of being a leader of the ‘Communist Wind’ in 1958. By early 1959, in step with Mao’s own doubts, Zeng

admitted that ‘because we had to concentrate our efforts on big scale steel production we did not do a thorough and careful job in reaping our harvest. As a result, we did a rough job and wasted some grain’.⁷¹ By 1960, half the province’s plough animals had disappeared, along with 60% of the agricultural implements. Cultivated land decreased by 11% and grain production by 35%.

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Unlike Secretary Lu of Henan the authorities in Anhui often attempted to cope with the famine by allowing people to leave. Many communes issued certificates allowing people to travel, and since there was no grain to be had anyway, the lack of ration books ceased to tie people to the land. The Zhunbei district of northern Anhui, like northern Henan, had an excess death rate of around 30% at the height of the famine. According to a report by Zeng’s successor, Li Baohua, some two million people died of ‘abnormal causes’ (the official term for starvation) in Anhui. But death by ‘abnormal causes’ was almost common in many parts of the Province. Hongkong’s Ming Boo described how Zeng hid the results of the rough job’ even from the central authorities:

“At that time Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were in charge of daily work in the Central Government, and in response to certain reports of disasters sweeping Anhui province they sent teams out, one after the other, to investigate. Twice the groups arrived in Anhui to look into the disaster, but both times they were turned away. The investigation teams were confined to the local guesthouse and not allowed to meet with lower level cadres or the masses. Deng and Liu both believed that without first-hand information it would be impossible to deal with Zeng sheng so they sent Hu Yaohang to Anhui at the head of a third team”.

Hu dealt diplomatically with Zeng but conducted a secret investigation. He had expected Zeng to obstruct him and had sent investigators to Anhui before leaving the capital. With materials provided by his own private investigators in hand, he told Zeng that he would visit Wuwei, Tianzhang and Quanshu counties. When he arrived in these counties, he confronted local cadres with the hard evidence he had and succeeded in loosening tongues and opening mouths.⁷³ After receiving Hu’s detailed report, Liu and Deng had Zeng

replaced by Li Baohua, and Mao, who had retired to the 'second line' of Party Affairs partly as a consequence of the loss of face in the Great Leap, was forced to sacrifice his protege.

Similar moves took place in Shandong, where party secretary Shu Tong was covering up mass famine deaths. In both cases, however, the officials in question were discreetly transferred horizontally, often to regional' secretaryships which were formally a step up from the Province level but actually had no power. No reasons were given for these transfers until much later.

Other Provinces

The famine became a factional football. Evidence of the nationwide impact of the disaster comes from materials released during the Cultural Revolution.

There are still many gaps in the knowledge which depend on the testimony of survivors. Many survivors continue to be unwilling to talk, even when it is obvious that to do so incurs no risk. "It was a difficult time" said one "and it is hard to discuss it".

One famine survivor from Jiangxi describes the situation there as:

"... not so bad, because Jiangxi is traditionally so poor that many remote areas don't eat rice, and have long depended on their own sweet potatoes or coarse grains. In addition, the population was low and one could go into the forests to eat tree leaves and bark".

He describes, however, seeing many people fall by the roadside in their effort to flee the starving towns, and not get up again. In Nanchang a story circulated that a certain peasant had made a fortune picking up roadside corpses and boiling 'pork-bone soup' out of them, but he was finally caught when a customer found a human finger in the bottom of his bowl.

"Our grain ration went down to eighteen catties a month, and then it was replaced by coarse grains and a few sweet potatoes. Finally we were told about wild protein', that is, ground tree leaves, and how to cook edible algae".

Interestingly, this man was a lower level state functionary, and early on had heard rumours of the reasons for Peng Dehuai's disappearance:

“Some of us began to suspect that Peng had been right after all. But of course no such thing was said or could have been said, even in private’.

Another survivor only encountered the famine when he was purged as a ‘right opportunist’ after Lushan and sent out from Shanghai to the poor Province of Guizhou. The official grain ration was then 31 catties (20.7 kg) a month for students in Shanghai, but only 21 catties (14 kg) for professors in Guizhou. Even this did not materialise; the grain was for consumption by cadres and the teachers were given the cobs to eat. In early 1960 this survivor began to suspect that people were dying of hunger, but “no one said such things’. A year after the fact, a close friend of his admitted that virtually his entire family had starved to death, which he had learned during his return home for Chinese New Year. Later, this survivor heard that in Yingxia County the death rate was 50% or more.

The same death rate apparently afflicted Zunyi, the historic site of the conference in Guizhou where Mao took full control of the Communist Party during the Long March. One intellectual who went to the Guizhou countryside in late 1961 to build irrigation canals reports finding the nearby villages almost empty. Some of the local peasants then admitted in hushed tones that most of the villagers had died of hunger. Guizhou, like Jiangxi, was a traditionally poor area where people were less dependent on central grain system to begin with and had well-honed strategies for famine survival. But Sichuan, on the other hand, was the traditional rice bowl of the country, and it paid a high price for its agricultural prestige. During the famine the official ration was reduced to 100 grams of rice per day for an adult and 40 grams for a child. Many peasants threw themselves on the mercy of a special kind of soil, called ‘Guanvin soil’ and believed to be edible. Many famine deaths were due to soil ingestion.

Another story about Ho Yaobang which is widely circulated in China places him in Sichuan during late 1959, looking into the severe floods in that area, and here he cuts a rather less impressive figure than in Anhui. During his investigation he became aware of the extent of starvation in the province, but upon his return, when Mao asked him about the situation, he simply said that Sichuan had suffered terrible natural disasters but, thanks to the meticulous

work of local cadres under the direction of the Central Authorities, the losses had been rapidly made up, or, as the bureaucratic shorthand of the day put it, "the situation is excellent; the problems, not small; the future bright". "At that time," said Hu in an internal speech in the early 1980's, "I did not dare tell the Chairman the truth. To have done so would have meant the end of me. I would have ended up like Peng Dehuai".

In Guangxi a special hospital was set up in which people on the verge of death were kept alive with gruel made of rice husks. Like other hospitals, they had to alter their patient records, especially the causes of death, to deny the facts. Famine oedema was called 'disease number two', while starving to death was referred to as 'from abnormal causes'. When referring to a whole region, famine disaster was simply referred to as 'a serious situation'. This convention is still used in literature about the period, and Chen Xuehui, writing in early 1989, cites the 'serious situation' and 'severe losses to the country', not starvation and death.⁷⁴ One survivor put it this way:

"Even to say that the steel target for 1959 was not being met would be to risk being called a right opportunist. To say that people were dying of hunger would be downright counter-revolutionary !"

In some areas, the reasons for self-censorship were not political at all, "In Guizhou," said one survivor, "people don't go out and beg. If there is nothing to eat, they go home, close the door, and die. It is not like Hunan or Anhui". This is not necessarily due to pride; transport is scarce in Guizhou, and there is also a tradition of banditry in difficult times, making travel hazardous. Another reason was the desire to avoid being a burden on the young. 'The writer Tang Min describes receiving letters from her grandfather in the countryside admonishing her family for sending funds and assuring them that food was plentiful. Her grandfather died of starvation. Similarly, a young student from Jiangxi was told to attend to his studies and not trouble himself about home visits. Later he learned that although many members of his family had died of starvation, his parents had been anxious not to tap the government grain stipend provided for students.'⁷⁵

The Big Cities Versus the Country

There can be no doubt about who bore the brunt of the great famine. A graph comparing urban and rural death rates makes this abundantly clear. (See Fig. 3, opposite).

Fig 3: Comparison of Urban and Rural Death Rates

A more anecdotal picture of rural life during the famine is available from comments of PLA men quoted by MacFarquhar:

“At present what the peasants eat in the villages is even worse than what dogs ate in the past. At that time dogs ate chaff and grain. Now the people are too hungry to work and pigs are too hungry to stand up. Commune members ask: Is Chairman Mao going to allow us to starve to death? Chairman Mao lives in Peking. Does he know about the everyday living of the peasant? So much grain was harvested. Where has it gone?”⁷⁶

That the worst of the famine affected the rural population is clear testimony of the excessive demands made by the State grain purchasing authority and the ‘Communist Wind, But cities suffered too. By August 1959 Beijing, Jinan and Tianjin cut grain rations to 12 catties (7.2 kg) a month per head. Beijing Dagongbao a popular paper in the capital, suggested “alternating liquid meals with solid meals’, and in many of the public canteens the sign ‘it is glorious to eat less than one’s food ration” washing above the rice barrel.”⁷⁷

Endnotes:

71. MacFarquhar, 1983, p 20

72. Source: *Nongye Jitihua Zongyao Wenxian Huibian* put out by the Central Committee Party Cadre School Publishing House, June 1981, (2nd vol).

73. Quoted in Yang Zhongmei 1989, pp. 159

74. Chen Xuewei, 1989 p. 74

75. These personal accounts were provided by informants inside China during conversations in late 1989

76. MacFarquhar, 1983, p 329

77. See article by H. Lethbridge, "The Urban Communes", in Kirby, 1961, p- 35

HOW MANY DIED NATIONWIDE?

It is known from reports released during the Cultural Revolution that 20,000 people starved to death in Guangdong.⁷⁸ But to this day there is no national death toll. In the Chinese version of MacFarquhar’s book, local death tolls are given; it is noted that the mortality rate doubled in 1960, and it is even allowed

that the population declined by 4.5% in 1960. Nevertheless, the Chinese version of MacFarquhar's book carefully omits his phrase "Any where from 16.4 to 29.5 million extra people died during the leap, because of the leap".⁷⁹ Curiously, even the figures listed in the official statistical yearbook do not add up. Although the decrease in population is given as 0.457%, which is far less than the figure in the Chinese version of MacFarquhar, the difference between the 1959 population (672,270,000) and the 1960 population (662,270,000) is the suspiciously round number of ten million, or 1.5%.⁸⁰

There was a non-human toll as well, Total loss to the national economy is now put at a hundred billion yuan, nearly enough to complete the first five-year capital construction plan twice over.⁸¹ In the year 1960 alone, grain production fell by 24.3% to the level of 1951, cotton took an even more drastic tumble-down - 51.2%. Oil bearing crops, vital to cooking and industry, decreased by 57.1%. The standard of living in the country did not regain the level of 1957 until 1965.⁸²

Endnotes:

78. See MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 330

79. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 330

80. Source: *Zhongguo Tongji Nianjian* (China Statistical Yearbook), Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe 1988. pp. 97-8

81. MacFarquhar 1983, p.330

82. Sources: MacFarquhar 1953, pp. 329-30; also, *Dangshi Yanjiu Ziliao* No 9, 1988

CALLOUSNESS AND PRIDE: THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

China, unlike the USSR of Stalin's time, was not utterly alone in facing its agricultural crisis, It had a crucial and very experienced ally, namely the Soviet Union itself. More than simple Soviet callousness stood between China's creeping famine and the relief and experience that could have made the crucial difference. China admitted to no one the extent of the problem, just as local officials had refused to admit the true situation in their localities to the centre. Even at the height of the famine, the winter of 1960, China continued to export grain to the USSR, and this was the most common reason given for the food shortages in the cities.⁸³

The folly of continuing to export grain during a famine was, to some extent, due to ignorance on the part of the State, explicable by the official fantasies of record grain production. It is a bitter truth that during 1958-59, when China should have been building up grain stocks, she exported about 13% of the total value of her agricultural output.⁸⁴ Many of these grain exports were going to the USSR in an attempt to pay off the debts China had incurred during the Korean War. The one country which could and should have come to China's aid, the Soviet Union, had had poor harvests of her own, and was more interested in outstanding debts.

An even more callous blow came at the very worst moment of the famine, in mid-1960. Within a few weeks the Soviets implemented a sudden decision to pull out of China, taking with them all their advisors and all chances of completing some 257 outstanding projects. The reasons given were rather spurious; harassment of Soviet advisors, tampering with their mail, and soon. The effect, however, was devastating. The action certainly played into the hands of the Central Government, which could now blame the economic difficulties on debts and Soviet sabotage. In fact, Mao used the occasion to hint that Peng had been a Soviet puppet all along.⁸⁵

But the excuse of debts and Soviet sabotage was merely a convenience. During the famine, exports to the Soviet Union, although nominally the same, were in fact reduced by half.⁸⁶ Although China's pre-famine 1958 exports were high in value terms (many went through Hong Kong to earn China foreign currency) only about 5% of the State grain purchasing quota, a little over two and a half million tonnes, went for export. Of this, only 453,000 tonnes of rice (45% of exports) was destined for the USSR. Livestock and meat were in greater demand, and to this day Chinese people remember Zhou Enlai's alleged retort to Soviet demands for live stock during the famine years, that Chinese pigs were for Chinese mouths.

Endnotes:

83. Conversations with Chinese of that generation today often state this official explanation

84. See article by T. C Lee, 'The Food Problem' in Kirby, 1961, p. 15

85. MacFarquhar, 1983, p. 238 and p.281

86. Kane, 1988, p.61

CHINA AND INTERNATIONAL RELIEF

Why didn't China appeal to the UN? China had been excluded from the UN by the US. In addition, relations were poor because China had not long before fought a bloody war with US troops operating under as the UN intervention force in Korea.

China was entirely isolated from international relief agencies; attempts by Mao to establish trade and aid relations with the US had met with a concerted resistance from the 'China Lobby'. In 1959-61, the China Lobby very nearly succeeded. Kane writes: "A request for aid would have had to reveal the full facts. In circumstances in which comparatively limited possibilities of famine relief had to be balanced against the much greater risk that other nations would take advantage of the government's terrible weakness resulting from famine on such a scale, it is difficult to see how a different decision could have been made".⁸⁷ She adds, however, that the Chinese made a virtue of necessity and the Foreign Minister Chen Yi scoffed at the notion that China "beg for food".

Endnotes:

87. Kane, 1988, p. 137

RECOVERY

Recovery from the famine took place from the bottom up. The Chairman of the State Planning Commission quietly took the next step, and advocated adjustments which vindicated Peng's criticisms without actually rehabilitating him. No notice was taken of the suggestion until Zhou Enlai took them up in August of 1960, when Mao was eventually forced to agree. Industrial projects were abandoned, peasants went back to the land, factories closed, and State aid to agriculture, which was at a record low of 4.1% of total State expenditure, was allowed to increase slowly to 16-18% by 1963. Grain was at last imported. Peasants, who for years had been told to "cut off the tail of capitalism" (including anything over one pig and three chickens), were allowed to take up secondary occupations. Over 40,000 rural markets were re-

established by 1961. Production ceased to be planned at anything below the level of the county, and although procurement remained high, better prices were offered. There is a great deal of evidence that these policies were merely post-hoc endorsements of actions which the localities had already taken.

Yet the endorsements were important, and sorely missed in places. Tao Zhu, the first secretary of Guangdong, introduced a new system of *baa than dao hu*, that is, essentially dissolving the communes and simply signing contracts for grain with individual families. This system, which has now been in force throughout China since 1980 or so, was almost immediately denounced as the restoration of capitalism in the countryside. Tao Zhu backtracked, and replaced his premature invention with a system of family level rewards for overfulfilling the quota and penalties for not achieving targets which, essentially, did the same thing.⁸⁸

Endnotes:

88. See Bennett. 1978. p. 32-3

THE FIRST AND LAST CASUALTY FAMILY PLANNING

One of the earliest casualties of the famine was China's nascent birth control policy. It is a well known demographic truism that famine produces first a depression, then a boom in birth rates, But this truism acted with particularly violent force in the Chinese famine, and on an unprecedented scale. (See Fig. 4).

The Great Leap and the Commune Movement created apparent labour shortages, particularly in the countryside, where birth is a vital source of family labour power. Furthermore, the commune system seemed to make child raising a profitable venture: children were supposed to be largely the financial responsibility of the commune, yet they still took care of their parents when grown.

Mao himself was an early advocate of birth control: in 1957, he said that "Mankind must control itself; we must create a planned increase in numbers". That same year, Shao Lizi, then a member of the Standing Committee of the

National People's Congress, spoke out in favour of a national birth control policy. At the same time Professor Ma Yinchu, president of Beijing University, published a work entitled *Xin Renkou Lun* (New Population Theory). In it, he argued against the conservative use to which Malthus' views on population had been put, and put forward his own population theory. Population, he argued, was one of the principal obstacles to China's development, and had to be taken seriously. He linked the planning of population to the 'food problem', and argued that the 'quality' of the population could be elevated only if the quantities were controlled. He recommended prizes for families of two children or less and a steeply graduated system of fines for more offspring. Finally, he argued that a planned population was an indispensable component of a planned economy.⁸⁹

Despite Mao's earlier advocacy of birth control, he refuted Ma Yinchu's work and his own phrase "more is good" gained in fluence. An article in the party theoretical journal *Hong Qi* (Red Flag) stating 'under the present situation, the more people we have the easier, faster, better and more economically we can build socialism' confirmed his approach.

A huge increase in births followed the famine, In a single decade 200 million people, then equivalent to the entire population of the US, were added to the population of China. On the other hand, the amount of land under cultivation, which declined during the famine years, remained 10% lower than it had been during the 1950's. By the mid 1970's average caloric intake had still not overtaken the pre-famine level. Not until Professor Ma's theories were quietly put into practice did the birth rate begin to decline and per capita calories start to increase.

Endnotes:

89. See Liu Zheng, 1982. p.15 and 1988, pp.364-5; see also Yu Ruxin, 1989, p.216

AN AVOIDABLE FAMINE?

One of the euphemisms used in China to refer to the famine is 'three years of natural disasters', and, initially at least, the entire blame was divided almost equally between floods, droughts and Russians. There are still some works,

recently published ones even, which adhere to this view; Chen Xuewei, for example, tells us that:

“1959 to 1961 were years of extremely severe natural disasters, and at the same time the Soviet government suddenly broke its contracts. Because of this, our country’s economy experienced extremely severe difficulties from 1959 to 1961”.⁹⁰

Both 1959 and 1960 were in fact bad weather years. Drought afflicted more than two million hectares of land in Heilongjiang, Hubei, Anhui and Shanxi provinces by mid-August and severe floods plagued the Yangzi basin and the south.⁹¹

There are certain publications in China with a narrower readership and deeper analysis, which disagree that these were the main reasons. Dangshi Wenhui (Party Affairs Report) reports, in an article on “Facing Our Mistakes and Losses”, “In some areas of the country, disasters were the main reason (for the famine), but these were not the majority. In most areas, our own mistakes were the main reason”. Liu Shaoqi, who was, after all, one of the principal leaders of the Great Leap, called the famine “Three parts nature and seven parts man”⁹²

Could the famine have been averted, had officials known what was really going on? In order to answer this question, Kane’s book looks at a more recent disaster year in a healthier communication environment. In 1980-81, when severe flooding and droughts affected large areas of central China, the situation had entirely changed. First and foremost, the information network upon which the State planners depend had been re-established, and it was possible to get accurate damage assessments from the Provinces. Secondly, the government organisations were not paralysed by factional struggles; local-level organisations could get relief work underway without having to depend on the unrealistic views of higher officials. The army was mobilised, and even the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization was invited to send a mission. Interestingly, little international aid was necessary, though of course it had a salutary effect on morale and encouraged the State to dig a bit deeper into reserves. One of the main results of the UN mission was an evaluation of the way in which the Chinese authorities themselves reacted, and the verdict was

overwhelmingly favourable. Of course, the 1980-81 disaster was nowhere near the scale of the earlier one. But even a quick examination of the factors which contributed to the success of the relief operation reveals many actions which were not carried out in the earlier disaster. The reasons, or at any rate excuses, for inaction can be found in the pervasive secrecy with which the authorities enshrouded the famine and then its victims.

Planned Economy - and Freedom of Information

Why does the famine remain an unmentionable gap in recent history? Many of China's current generation of senior leaders -Chen Yun, Bo Yibo, Li Xiannian, and even Deng Xiaoping - played an honourable role in trying to mitigate the excesses of the Leap and virtually all of them suffered in its aftermath, particularly during the reprisal of the anti-Peng campaign in the Cultural Revolution. The atrocities of the Cultural Revolution are certainly well-acknowledged and publicised. So why does the impossible charade of famine cover-up continue after thirty years? One Chinese scientist explains:

"The revolution was made in the name of the poor, with the aim of wiping out hunger. Ten years of revolutionary power, and then three years of terrible famine. Can you then say that your revolution was a success?"

Sinologist and demographer Kane has, however, a different view. The central preoccupation of Kane's work is not censorship or even human rights; rather she is concerned with how the analytical concepts of exchange entitlements are refracted in a centrally planned economy which seems to have successfully abolished the sort of 'class-based' famines described by Amartya Sen (1981) -only to substitute a nationwide famine. It is worth repeating her conclusion on the role of the centrally planned economy in the chinese famine:

"Centrally-planned economies do have a greater potential for limiting the effects of a disaster than others; a highly efficient administration is essential in the management of a potential famine; and both these factors maybe found most often in a country organised along socialist lines - which may also have a commitment to the common good which helps to mitigate suffering. Such factors may eliminate class-based famines, or those which are limited in scale. It is, however, unlikely that they could entirely avert deaths in any large

country or region of the world which is poor, has a precarious food balance and limited communications".⁹³

Endnotes:

90. Chen Xuewei, 1989, p.74

91. See Kirby, 1961, p.217; also MacFarquhar, 1983, pp. 201, 322

92. *Dangshi Wenhui*. "Shiwu he Cuoze Zai Mianqian". 1989, no. 1

93. Kane, 1985, p. 153

FAMINE IN THE FUTURE

This conclusion is practically identical to that expressed by the report to the Chinese People's Consultative Conference which acknowledged, albeit for internal government consumption only, the death toll of fifteen million:

"we cannot say for certain whether or not there will be further such (famine) deaths. Although our income level has been improved, we have not yet solved the basic problem of the level of food intake nationwide. Other problems as well may intervene; thus we cannot rule out this possibility in the future".⁹⁴ As Professor Ma Yinchu argued so prophetically, before his voice was silenced in 1958, the solution of the food problem awaits careful planning, including population planning. Such planning can, in time, wipe out famine, if there is accurate, reliable and freely exchanged information.

The era of famines is perhaps not over for China; her own demographers now acknowledge the failure to prevent a second baby boom as the original baby boomers start to bear their own. China will not meet her target of holding the population under 1.2 billion by the year 2,000 and it is generally accepted that 1.3 billion is about all she can hope to feed. Yet this failure is a failure to plan correctly - using accurate and verifiable information - not a failure of planning itself. The collapse of the one-child policy in the countryside has been blamed on poor statistics and the familiar 'wind of exaggeration', this time on the part of local birth control officials. The economic policy of reform has certainly provided both the incentive and the means to resist the punitive fines for excessive childbearing to many entrepreneurial peasants, but, of course, in this era as much as in Mao's, policies are above criticism. The problems which brought the famine of 1959-61 to China are far from solved - above all,

the problem of freedom of information and opinion seems once again intractable and explosive. Whatever famines the twenty-first century may hold in store for China - and the world - they must not be approached blindly. In the early months of 1959, as the Great Leap Forward brought China to its knees and corpses began to line rural roads all over her hinterland, economic planner Chen Yun argued against those who believed that China had solved her food problem once and for all and reminded his colleagues of Mao's old slogan *shi qi qiu shi*, or 'seek truth from facts'. He also reminded them of a quote from Hegel, of which Engels was fond, "Freedom is the recognition of necessity". It was a phrase which meant many things in that context, but perhaps one thing which did not occur to the speaker or the audience was the crucial necessity of free expression.

Endnotes:

94. Source *Cankao Ziliao* (Study Materials), published by Kexueyuan Yanjiu Ketizu, May 1989

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Part 2: The Politics of Information

FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA AND SUDAN IN THE 1980S

INTRODUCTION

On 21 November 1984, the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee summoned representatives of Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund (SCF) to Westminster, to interview them on the famine in Ethiopia.

The famine had become urgent international news on 23 October due to the BBC-Visnews film by Michael Buerk and Mohamed Amin of the feeding centre at Korem. As the world press clamoured to interview representatives of British aid agencies on famine, the British government was embarrassed by its near-total inactivity. As the meeting drew to a close, Sir Antony Kershaw, chairman of the Committee, became increasingly flustered and angry. Why, he wanted to know, had the British government been kept in the dark about the impending famine? He questioned Colonel Hugh Mackay, Overseas Director of SCF:¹

Sir Antony Kershaw: Why do you not tell the British embassy there [in Ethiopia]?

Col. Hugh Mackay: We do and we maintain close links with the embassies, but I come back to that rather curious phenomenon that people will not believe a famine until they see it,

Sir A. K: That is not my question. I was asking why your people do not tell the British embassy who can then pass it on [to London]?

Col. H. M: We do tell them and that information is discussed in great detail at regular intervals with High Commissions and with embassies.

Sir A. K: Did you say that they did not believe you? Col. H. M: I am afraid not at this stage, Sir.

Sir A. K: Are you saying Save the Children Fund is not believed by embassies?

Col. H. M: In this particular field, Sir, in this particular centre, in this particular stage of trying to predict a famine, at this stage, no.

Sir A. K: Can you give me examples of where you predicted a famine and the British government did not take notice?

Col. H. M: Sir, the Ethiopian famine which in our reckoning started two years ago.

Sir A. K: Did you report it?

Col. H. M: Yes.

Sir A. K: Then?

Col. H. M: They did fuck all, Sir.

[Pause]

Sir A. K: How do you know nothing was done about it?

Col. H. M: They did believe us, let us say, but their response was slightly negative.

In the official records of the meeting, Col. Mackay's response to the penultimate question has been rendered simply as "yes, Sir."² The obscenity of mass starvation may apparently be included in the records of the proceedings of the Foreign Affairs Committee, or indeed covered on television, but mere verbal obscenities cannot.

However, leaving aside the triviality of censoring a four-letter word, the exchange between Sir Antony Kershaw and Colonel Mackay illustrates some of the important themes on the subject of famine and censorship.

POLITICAL SENSITIVITY AND EXPEDIENCY

One theme of this report is the political sensitivity of famine. The British government became intensely embarrassed by its inaction during 1982-4 over the Ethiopian famine. The Ethiopian government was also embarrassed by the famine, especially as the most severe phase began just as the celebrations to mark ten years of the Revolution were under way. Publicity surrounding a famine is embarrassing to any government: publicity surrounding a concealed famine is even more embarrassing.

Reports of Famine were Available

News about famine can be, and sometimes is, suppressed completely. However, in Ethiopia and Sudan during the 1980s, there have consistently been reports documenting the existence of famines. These reports have, at different times, come from relief agencies, churches, self-help associations, local government, and even central government departments and have regularly reached western governments and the international press. While some reports have lacked the detail one would wish, famines, however local, have not gone unreported. The questions which must be addressed are what has been done with the information generated; what is believed and what is treated with scepticism; what is publicised and what is forgotten or suppressed; what is acted upon and what is ignored.

Official Indifference

The third theme is that official indifference to a famine can amount to censorship by a donor government. This is true of both the government of a famine-stricken country such as Ethiopia and the government of a rich country with a large overseas aid budget such as the U.K. Information has to be interpreted for the layperson including the politician- and it has to be credible. Although Oxfam and SCF reported the famine at regular intervals to the British embassy in Addis Ababa, no-one in a position of influence gave them the attention they required to generate wider interest or action. The higher echelons of the Ethiopian government also refused to give priority attention to the famine until very late in the day, thereby eschewing the opportunity to convince the donor community of the urgent need for a response. This amounted to censorship.

Perceptions of Famine

A fourth theme concerns the discrepancy between what Europeans believe a famine ought to look like and what actually occurs during the early stages of famine. Colonel Mackay referred to the phenomenon that in Ethiopia during 1982-4, people would not believe in the existence of a famine until they had witnessed its final stage - mass starvation - for themselves. Even aid agency visitors to countries such as Ethiopia notoriously fail to observe the true extent of poverty in the rural areas.³ They tend to stay by the roadsides, visit development projects, meet community leaders and other people who are

relatively rich, and meet men rather than women. They become “rural development tourists”. Moreover, the early stages of famine are often not immediately visible unless one is trained to recognise the significance of traditional coping strategies. Thus, visitors to northern Ethiopia failed to see the increasingly desperate plight of peasants in remote villages, and failed to read the early signs of impending famine, such as the escalating sale of farm animals, or mounting indebtedness.

A theme that did not emerge in this discussion was the cause of the famine, which was implicitly attributed to drought. In fact, a combination of military and agricultural policies by the Ethiopian government were at least as important in creating the famine as were natural causes. For a number of reasons, the voluntary agencies and the Ethiopian government combined to censor information on this aspect of the famine.

Endnotes

1. Foreign Affairs Committee, 1 1984, pp. 22-3
2. Later that day, when Col. Mackay and his counterpart from Oxfam, Mr Michael Harris, went to the BBC to be interviewed for the evening news, the BBC received a telephone call from the House of Commons. The BBC were told that Col. Mackay had used an obscenity in his recent meeting with the Foreign Affairs Committee. The BBC then asked Col. Mackay for an undertaking that he would not use such language on a live television broadcast; if he could not give such an undertaking, they would regretfully have to cancel the interview!

THREE FAMINES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

This report will analyse the role of the management of information in three famines in Ethiopia and Sudan during the 1980s.

Information was controlled by different actors: the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan, the western donor nations, international and private relief agencies, and the media. Management of information ranged from concealing famine outright to disinformation on the causes of the famines, where they were most severe, and what was being done to relieve them. These institutional and political factors influenced individual outsiders' exposure to, and perception, of famines, creating another source of distortion. Reporting of the famines in the western media is critically determined by this management of information and by luck.

The making and screening of the Buerk-Amin film of Korem in October 1984 was the outcome of a string of fortunate coincidences.⁴ Five years later, in November 1989, the BBC very nearly cancelled its appeal for Ethiopia on behalf of Britain's major overseas charities because of an apparent lack of public interest following the showing of Michael Buerk's report on famine in Tigray province of northern Ethiopia. The BBC assesses public interest by the number of phone calls it receives. The 9 O'Clock News which contained the report on Tigray was followed by an interview with Margaret Thatcher, and the BBC switchboard was jammed with phone calls concerning her interview. As a result, very few of those who called to express their concern at the famine were able to get through, and the BBC inferred that there was little public interest.

The response to a famine by the so-called 'international community'⁵ is, in large part, determined by media coverage. This coverage is an outcome of factors that have little to do with the nature and severity of the famine itself. In each of the three famines studied in this paper we will find a different combination of protagonists promoting, concealing, and distorting information. The first famine to be looked at is that of 1982-5 in Ethiopia, chiefly Wollo and Tigray provinces. (See map, Fig. 5). From the earliest harvest failures, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) of the Ethiopian government and relief agencies such as Oxfam and SCF were reporting the extent and severity of the famine with remarkable accuracy. But western aid donors failed to intervene. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government deliberately misrepresented the causes of the famine by minimising the role in its creation played by government military tactics and agricultural policies.

The second famine is that of Sudan during 1983-5, in the western regions of Darfur and Kordofan, and the Red Sea hills to the east. In some ways this was a mirror image of the 1982-5 Ethiopian famine, insofar as the Sudan government consistently denied the existence of the famine, but the US Agency for International Development (USAID) responded quickly and generously. This illustrates that donors who usually have access to information can, if they choose, act to forestall famine.

The third case study is of southern Sudan during 1986-9. The Sudan government and western donors continued to deny the existence of a famine which turned out to be at least as severe as that of 1982-5 in Ethiopia. This famine was the most censored of all those which occurred in the Horn of Africa during the 1980s. This censorship is ironic in view of the fact that during this period Sudan had one of the most prolific presses in Africa, with up to forty independent newspapers and journals published in Khartoum.

Endnotes:

3. Chambers, 1983, pp. 10-25.
 4. Harrison and Palmer, 1986, pp.110-18.
 5. In this context, the 'international community' is a cartel of western nations with structural grain surpluses. In the text which follows, relief agencies' are those which work at field level; 'aid donors' are predominantly governments and those which fund relief agencies.
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CASE STUDIES: NORTHERN ETHIOPIA 1982-5

This is commonly referred to as the famine of 1984-5 which in itself tells us something important about the politics of information. People in northern Ethiopia estimate that the famine began in 1982; western nations, having been alerted at least a year earlier, assumed it began only in October 1984, when it was reported by the BBC. Sometimes it is even called the famine of 1984-6, because the relief effort continued into 1986, even though the famine was by then over for most rural people.

The "Unknown Famine" of 1972-4

Information management during the famine of 1982-5 must be understood in the context of the famine of a decade earlier, which was a contributing factor to the downfall of the Emperor Haile Selassie. During 1972-4 a severe famine struck areas of lowland Wollo. It was concealed by the Emperor, who had concealed earlier famines. For instance, severe famines had struck Tigray and Wollo in 1958 and 1966 but almost no attention was paid to these crises by Addis Ababa or from abroad.⁶ In 1973 the famine was exposed by UK television journalist, Jonathan Dimbleby. His film "The Unknown Famine", harrowing even to those who have seen the television coverage of the more extreme famines of the 1980s, resulted in intense international attention and a

relief effort The crisis helped to depose the Emperor by revealing his stubborn pride and mismanagement. On the day of his downfall, 11 September 1974 Ethiopian television showed clips from “The Unknown Famine” juxtaposed with scenes from the lavish wedding of the daughter of a prominent government official, for which the wedding cake had been specially ordered from Italy. The next day the crowds shouted *leiba!* (thief!) as Haile Selassie was driven from the Palace to a police station in the back seat of a small Volkswagen.

The new revolutionary government at once promised to help prevent a repeat of the famine. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) was set up. The duties of the RRC included a famine early-warning system which involved the systematic collection of information on rainfall, crops and economic conditions among the rural population in famine-prone areas of the country. The RRC’s early-warning system has been consistently commended by the relief agencies operating in Ethiopia: no comparable system exists in neighbouring countries.

Early Warnings

The RRC, despite limited resources, did its job with admirable efficiency. From 1982, it gave clear and unequivocal warnings of a crisis, first relatively small and localised, but gradually expanding and deepening so that by early 1984 it enveloped most of northern Ethiopia. After each principal harvest season, the RRC announced its estimates of the numbers of people facing severe food shortages and likely starvation. These were:

1981: 4,514,000

1982: 2,831,000

1983: 3,899,600

1984: 6,098,000

The preciseness of the numbers arose from the village-by-village system of collecting the information in the most accessible areas. Areas not accessible to the RRC had less detailed estimates. For instance, the estimate for war-affected Tigray in 1983 was exactly one million. Included in the total for 1981 were some 1.6 million war-displaced people: the RRC was not even playing down political and military aspects of the problem at this stage. Until late 1983

Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the RRC, was rather cavalier about the imminence of famine. A personal visit to Korem, and the increasingly grave field reports changed that. By early 1984, the RRC was speaking with a new note of desperation. On 30 March 1984, the RRC made a formal appeal for food aid, and circulated a document entitled "Assistance Requirements 1984". This concluded: "Ethiopia is facing a potential disaster of considerable magnitude in which this year around one fifth of the country's population will need assistance in one form or another. If those affected do not receive relief assistance the consequences will be frightening"?

Voluntary relief agencies such as SCF were also active in recording the signs of impending famine and passing them on to western embassies. In early 1983, the relief agencies sent teams to Wollo and Gondar provinces and confirmed the broad outlines of the RRC estimate of need. They formulated an appeal, which was broadcast by the BBC on 31 March 1983 - exactly one year before the RRC's ill-fated 1984 appeal. Altogether, there were at least 20 warnings given to the donors between March 1981 and October 1984.⁸

In addition to warnings from RRC on the government side, the relief agencies of the rebel fronts in Eritrea and Tigray, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) published their predictions of famine and appeals for aid. These did not elicit any significant response from the donors until April 1985 - six months after the donors had responded to the Ethiopian government.

Lack of Donor Concern

The western aid donors consistently reacted to the reports and appeals with cynicism. Some recorded responses to the RRC's appeals include:⁹

"They come up with a figure which nobody believes" (FEC official).

"Every year I have been here for the last four to five years they have said that several million people were facing food shortages. If this was true at least a million would have died by now" (official of the UN World Food Programme).

"If we see the figures we tend to divide by ten - maybe that is a very cynical attitude. If there is a bad year, we might add ten per cent" (EEC official).

There were various reasons for this cynicism. One was the prevailing negative attitude towards Ethiopia's marxist government by the western aid donors.

Ethiopia was regarded as a problem to be dealt with by the USSR, its closest ally. A second factor was the institutional constraints within the international aid system itself, which was grinding to a halt with bureaucratic inertia¹⁰. The donor system for the most part rewards risk-avoidance and conservatism in committing food aid. Officials are unwilling to risk their careers by drawing attention to embarrassing or even urgent problems. Thus, before October 1984, there was no promotion to be gained for advocating increased aid to Ethiopia. A third factor was the inability of officials to believe in the famine until they witnessed its final stages. The RRC took foreign aid officials on tours of famine-affected areas. They witnessed poverty, but not mass starvation, and were unable to read the signs of approaching famine. The tourists returned unimpressed: "The RRC. . . says it will put on a show and it puts on a flop".¹¹ The donors' cynicism bred a weary fatalism throughout the remainder of the aid system. Aid officials despaired of summoning enough resources to meet the emergency. In early 1984 a team from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) believed that Ethiopian ports could handle only a fraction of the relief required and so, quite arbitrarily, cut the estimated total need from 450,000 to 125,000 tonnes of grain.¹² The 450,000 tonnes was only half the RRC's true assessment of need: they, too, had reduced it in a futile attempt to appear more credible to the donors. But during 1985 the port of Assab showed that it could handle over one million tonnes of grain.

Television producers in the UK in 1984 regarded famine as not a 'nice news item'.¹³ They did not want to risk their ratings by transmitting 'boring' stories, and so British media coverage of the famine was delayed for three months in mid-1984.

Another prevalent attitude, though rarely voiced publicly, is that the root problem in northern Ethiopia is a Malthusian crisis due to over-population. This carries the implication that food relief is only a short term palliative, and that in the long run there is a need for a drastic population reduction. Such attitudes were found among British administrators in 19th century India: "what is the use of saving lives when once again the people so saved would suffer later in the same way?"¹⁴

There were major shortcomings in the information provided by the RRC. It was secretive about its methods and criteria for assessing who was suffering from a food shortage, and some of its figures were obviously estimates. The RRC was therefore unable to defend all its assessments against the sceptics' objections. However, in retrospect, the RRC's information was remarkably accurate. A brief comparison between the official estimates and those prepared by agencies such as SCF and Oxfam would have confirmed their essential truth.

On 6 August 1984 the RRC held another meeting calling for aid. By then, the March appeal had resulted in commitments of only 95,000 tonnes of relief food and no deliveries. Commissioner Dawit said: "the gathering famine is approaching its height and every minute of delay means further aggravation to the problem".¹⁵ The donors remained steeped in indifference and this appeal also failed.

Censorship in Ethiopia

The press is entirely state-controlled in Ethiopia. This includes daily newspapers, periodicals and even the Ethiopian News Agency. There are three daily newspapers, one of which is an English language paper and even the advertising has to be officially approved before publication.

National journalists cannot use anything but government sources. Foreign journalists require a visa to visit the country and their activities are monitored by plain-clothes police officers. They are restricted to areas agreed with the government and require explicit permission to travel beyond these areas, usually only in the company of a government official.

The Ethiopian television and radio services are also state-controlled but have relatively small audiences, mainly concentrated in the towns and cities. It is estimated that the television audience is perhaps 40,000 and radio approximately 100,000.

While the RRC circulated reports to those it hoped might become donors, other sectors of the Ethiopian government censored news of the famine. During most of 1983 and 1984, journalists could not travel to the heart of the famine zone in Tigray and northern Wollo. This was partly due to security concerns - the rebel Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was active in

these areas - and partly because members of the central leadership considered the famine to be “an embarrassment and humiliation to the Revolution”.¹⁶ However, journalists could and did travel to other areas affected, albeit less severely, by famine. In July 1984, knowing that the most severe famine lay well to the north, Michael Buerk was obliged to travel south to Wollaita to obtain footage of famine. During the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Revolution, which fell in September 1984, restrictions were particularly severe. No foreigners at all were allowed to travel north. It was feared that coverage of the famine would detract from the triumphant celebrations of the supposed advances of the Revolution, especially if the TPLF succeeded in kidnapping a journalist or aid worker. This strict censorship occurred at a critical moment in the development of the famine. The state-controlled media in Ethiopia were also severely restricted in what they could broadcast about the famine. While the *Ethiopian Herald* newspaper covered the RRC appeals in January and March, and other aspects of the drought (the word ‘famine’ was never used), there was no coverage between July and September 1984. Even the RRC Food Aid Appeal meeting on 6 August was not reported.¹⁷ Official speeches and reports during the Revolution celebrations made no reference to agricultural failures. However, immediately following the celebrations, on 2 October, the first campaign of the newly-formed Workers’ Party of Ethiopia was announced: this was to combat the ‘natural problem’ of drought in the north. It was this admission and mobilization that led - among other things - to Michael Buerk and Mohamed Amin being given permission to travel north two weeks later. They received their travel permits despite a large offensive by the TPLF, which actually succeeded in capturing one of Buerk and Amin’s intended destinations, the town of Lalibela. Significant coverage of the famine on Ethiopian radio started on 25 October,¹⁸ and was highly partial. The reporting concentrated on the newly set-up government ‘Dis aster Committee’, and the three-day tour of famine-stricken areas and resettlement sites by Colonel Mengistu, the head of state. Subsequent media coverage of the ‘natural problem’ continued to focus on the efforts of the government, the Party and their Eastern Bloc allies in relief and rehabilitation.¹⁹

The Ethiopian government concealed the existence of the famine from its own people, particularly during the critical months July-September 1984. Western donors, however, do not rely on the Ethiopian media for their information. Government censorship did not prevent western donor representatives being provided with frequently updated reports of the RRC and voluntary agencies. For instance, the RRC report presented at the 6 August meeting noted that the number of people in need had risen to over six million.²⁰ Western nations have cited censorship by the Ethiopian government in defence of their tardy response to the famine.²¹ This was not altogether true.

Media Coverage

The BBC-Visnews film of Korem broadcast on 23 October 1984 was undoubtedly the turning point in the outside world's - and indeed the Ethiopian government's - response to the famine. Why this was so is an important and somewhat disturbing reflection.

The changing nature of the UK's media coverage of third-world countries has been excellently analysed by Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer.²² They identify a number of reasons why sustained high-quality coverage of the problems in countries such as Ethiopia has declined in the last twenty years. The growth of telecommunications has meant a shortening of deadlines: what counts as 'news' is therefore becoming more and more recent. Places which are difficult to reach become subject to censorship through the very fact of their being inaccessible to the media. Rapid international travel means that newspapers and television have replaced their specialist long-term foreign correspondents, scattered around the world, with media 'flying squads', who rush to wherever there is believed to be a 'hot' news story. This results in a loss of expert knowledge on low-profile developments in a country, and a consequent inability to recognise the early signs of famine. Television news has also gained in importance. Television requires pictures, which can be obtained only by using a film crew: filming in remote famine areas is time-consuming (and therefore expensive) and uncomfortable. The Ethiopian famine areas, it must also be remembered, were extremely difficult to reach due to government restrictions. Transmission depends on satellites, which in turn

require good communications to meet deadlines. Finally, the early stages of a famine do not always make compelling television pictures.

However the British press did not ignore the developing famine between 1982-4. For example, the first press coverage appeared on 17 February 1983, when all the major British newspapers covered SCF's prediction of famine.²³ The BBC and Visnews followed. During March and April, the coverage continued and temporarily increased when British and Irish relief workers in Korem were kidnapped by the TPLF on 21 April. *The Times* in particular gave the famine much coverage, with a major story on 28 February and a leading article on 24 March, entitled "Ethiopians need help". However, during the twelve months following May 1983, media interest in the famine waned, primarily because massive death from starvation had not yet occurred. Press coverage increased in the middle of 1984, before peaking in late October.

The Change: October 1984

Why did the Buerk-Amin film of October 1984 succeed in making the famine newsworthy while the coverage during the spring of 1983 failed? This sudden change in the newsworthiness of the famine was unexpected, and possibly unique. In part, it was due to the fact that the famine was, after months of deepening hardship and misery, finally reaching the stage of mass starvation. Many poor farmers, having eked out their last grain reserves, sold their remaining animals, borrowed from their neighbours, and scoured the hills for roots and leaves, now dismantled their houses to sell for firewood and set off on the road in a last desperate act of seeking relief. In part it was due to increased coverage by journalists, particularly photo-journalists. One comes back to the curious phenomenon that people will not believe a famine until they see it. In February 1983 and July 1984 the BBC and Visnews broadcast films about the famine. However, on neither occasion were they able to travel to the epicentre of the famine in northern Wollo and Tigray. In Wollaita, Michael Buerk filmed starving people, but the surrounding landscape was green and lush - it did not fit with western preconceptions of famine. It was only in October 1984 that Colonel Mengistu allowed Michael Buerk and Mohamed Amin to travel to Korem. They could then see and film what the worst of the famine really looked like. Conditions had deteriorated since July

1984 and were far worse than in February 1983. Following the failure of the 1984 summer rains, people had migrated *en masse* to places such as Korem. The mass of displaced people made a compelling picture, and Amin's film was one of exceptional quality. On 23 October 1984, people in donor countries could at last see convincing proof of the severity of the famine. That same week, Mike Wooldridge reported the famine extensively on BBC radio, setting out the harsh facts with immense journalistic skill. However, in the absence of visual material, Wooldridge's broadcasts had far less impact, as evidenced by the subsequent public outcry following pictures of starvation. Another reason for the Korem film's impact was that the western countries were perhaps more receptive than previously. In late 1984 there was a greater feeling of prosperity in Britain and the USA than in early 1983. Both countries had, in the interim, re-elected conservative governments. The famine also occurred at a time of massively publicised food surpluses in the EEC. The appeal in the UK coincided with Christmas shopping. The western conscience was therefore especially vulnerable. A major factor in sustaining news interest was the Band Aid initiative by Bob Geldof: the Band Aid singers in their new humanitarian role were, by definition, newsworthy.

When famine became newsworthy, the attitude of western governments changed literally overnight from cynical indifference to a hasty scramble to supply relief. The British government, until this moment an implacable critic of marxist Ethiopia, quickly reversed its position. Prior to October 1984, famine relief to Ethiopia was considered a dull subject: donor institutions considered it a political and financial liability and its advocates could expect little response for their pains. October 1984 was a veritable earthquake in the aid world. The sudden popularity of the famine issue raised the political stakes. For the first time there was prestige to be gained by advocating famine relief in Ethiopia - for the officials of relief agencies, politicians, and journalists. There was also much to be lost from appearing insensitive to famine. Compassion for starving children became a necessity for politicians, and a programme in Ethiopia became a prerequisite for any respectable international aid agency. This had important consequences for the response to famine in Sudan in 1985 and in Ethiopia in 1987, which will be taken up later.

One element of the famine relief effort in Ethiopia during 1982-4 is censorship by international donors. The RRC and relief agencies provided regular information on the unfolding crisis. Steeped in cynicism and indifference, the western donors chose not to listen. Their cynicism was exposed in October 1984 by the public outcry over the famine, but that came too late for many thousands of people in Wollo and Tigray.

Concealing the Causes of the Famine

It is only partly true that the famine was caused by drought and ecological degradation. Mass starvation was also caused by war, agricultural policies and forced removal of people. Some donors, particularly the USA, alluded to these factors in general terms. But the specifics of how the Ethiopian government killed and impoverished people were suppressed.

Specific causes of the famine which received little or no documentation were the activities of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) and taxation of the peasantry in Wollo. The AMC imposes a quota on all peasant farmers and buys this quota of grain at a fixed price. In Wollo during 1983-4 the quota remained unchanged from previous years, despite the harvest failure. Nor did the fixed price change, despite the exceptionally high prices for grain on the free market. As a result, peasant farmers had to sell their grain reserves, and those with no harvest of their own were even forced to buy grain on the free market to sell at the fixed price to the AMC, incurring enormous losses. Many farmers sold their animals to meet these obligations. In addition, peasants had to pay taxes and levies, ironically including a 'famine levy' to support the RCC.²⁴

The Ethiopian government did not, for the most part, censor information about the *existence* of the famine. They did, however, systematically and effectively censor information about the *causes* of the famine. The government ascribed the famine entirely to drought and soil erosion. In government pronouncements, the word 'famine' (in Amharic *rehab*) was not used, instead only 'drought' (*diriq*) and 'natural problem' (*yetefetero chigir*). This is equally true of the RRC's publication in English, *The Challenges of Drought*, which refers to the (pre-Revolutionary) *famine* of 1972-4 but only the (post-Revolutionary) *drought* of 1984-5, along with such demonstrably false

statements as: “the fact is that much of Ethiopia, particularly the northern provinces of Tigray and Wollo, is today an uninhabitable wasteland” and “there have scarcely been any real rains in the drought-prone areas since the 1972-4 catastrophe”.²⁵ Insofar as man-made causes of the ‘emergency’ are recognised, they are confined to soil erosion due to overpopulation, which is in turn presented as a rationale for the government’s resettlement programme. This was a view shared to some extent by donors. In the Ethiopian media, the distortion of the causes of the famine ranged from outright censorship of the existence of a war in the north, merely regarding it as a problem of a few ‘bandits’, to more subtle propaganda measures such as television films of resettlement which shot the Wollo landscape through a filter, making it appear red and barren, contrasting with the blue green colours of the resettlement sites.

A second critical factor in the famine was a succession of military offensives into Tigray and Eritrea. The ‘Red Star’ offensive of 1982, against “anti-freedom, anti-unity, anti-people and anti-peace bandit gangs”,²⁶ involved over 100,000 soldiers. During 1983 and 1984 further huge campaigns were mounted, proclaiming similar slogans, (though not that of the 19th century Emperor Tewodoros: “Soldiers eat, peasants provide”), which devastated huge tracts of countryside, and drove over 100,000 people from their homes. The ‘Silent Offensive’, so-named because of the lack of attention it received in both the Ethiopian and international media, was launched on 27 October 1984 and continued well into 1985.²⁷ From February to May 1985 the 8th Offensive raged through central Tigray, destroying farms, grain stores and clinics, driving people from their homes, and disrupting the relief effort organised by REST. Losses were so huge in these campaigns that a new round of military conscription was introduced in 1984. The only aspect of the military action which did receive significant attention from the international press was attacks by the Ethiopian Air Force on relief convoys moving from Sudan to rebel-held areas of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Resettlement

One issue did however receive considerable international public ity: the forced resettlement programme. The sudden forced removal of people already

weakened by lack of food inevitably causes more deaths. These are due to, amongst other factors, the final breakdown of remaining supportive networks at village level and succumbing to communicable diseases in overcrowded reception camps. In October 1984, the Ethiopian Government launched a vast programme of social engineering with the aim of turning the famine from a problem to an opportunity. The plan was to resettle, in phase 1 alone, 600,000 people from Wollo and Tigray to more productive southern parts of the country. The logic was Malthusian - these northern areas could no longer support their population - but other reasons also lurked behind, including the desire to depopulate areas which supported rebel movements, and the aim of creating an agricultural workforce in cash-crop growing areas of the country, under the sole control of the government. The resettlement scheme was the government's single major response to the relief programme: in the Ethiopian media, 'famine relief' and 'resettlement' became synonymous. It is no coincidence that resettlement was started at exactly the moment when Buerk and Amin were at last allowed to travel north to see how bad things had become there. The aid unleashed by the media coverage of October 1984 allowed the RRC to divert most of its own resources to the resettlement effort. However, for the western agencies, the main point of contention was the extent to which the resettlement was voluntary. In December 1985, the French agency Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF) spoke out publicly about instances of forced resettlement which they had witnessed in northern Wollo. In Korem, government militia had come three times to take 600 'volunteers' for resettlement. In Kerella, people were indiscriminately taken from the fields and houses for resettlement, often at gunpoint. They were kept in huge overcrowded transit centres with no sanitary or medical facilities, and many died. They were taken south in crammed lorries and unpressurised aeroplanes, and so, many more died from suffocation and exposure. Those who offered any resistance were beaten and sometimes killed. MSF estimated that the resettlement programme caused 100,000 deaths. MSF's public stand caused an outcry by the media, and the agency was immediately expelled by the angry government. No other relief organizations backed up MSF's position; instead, they rushed to disassociate themselves

from it and to belittle MSF's famine relief work. Kurt Jansson, head of the UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE), declared the allegations to be unfounded and the public statement irresponsible.²⁸ He omitted to mention that during October and November 1985 the UNEOE office in Addis Ababa had itself received reports from UN staff in Wollo which documented, in detail, at least five instances of forcible resettlement, and related human rights abuses, and that the UNEOE "investigation" into the affair consisted only of a guided tour of major towns in the province, accompanied by RRC and Party officials. Neither the original reports nor the account of the UNEOE tour have ever been made public.

The UN and the relief agencies refused to speak out, not because they believed MSF's information to be wrong (though the figure of 100,000 deaths was at that time open to dispute), but because they also feared being expelled.

Private Relief Agency Dilemmas

Non-governmental relief agencies faced a difficult moral dilemma. During 1982-4, agencies such as SCF and Oxfam had been virtually the only foreign presence in the famine-affected areas. Their role was a vital one, both in providing assistance and in publicising the deteriorating situation. A good example of their constructive intervention occurred in March 1983, when the *Sunday Times* carried a classic headline across its front page: "Starving babies' food sold for Soviet arms".²⁹ The article began: "There is mounting evidence that food sent from the west to drought-stricken northern Ethiopia is being diverted. . . to the Soviet Union". This claim was false. In a letter to the *Sunday Times* on 3 April, the SCF and Oxfam field directors in Ethiopia refuted the allegations and argued that it would be disastrous for Ethiopia if relief were curtailed at this point. The policy of SCF and Oxfam was, therefore, to present the Ethiopian famine as a humanitarian tragedy. This indeed it was. But this presentation inevitably played down political aspects of the famine, which amounted to a degree of self-censorship. Shortly after MSF made their allegations, an Oxfam nurse, Carol Ashwood, confirmed that food had been withheld from famine victims with the aim of forcing them to

resettle.³⁰ The Oxfam press officer responded to the implicit slur on agency complicity with the resettlement programme as follows:

“We continue to make representations to the Ethiopian authorities if we have evidence that the scale or speed of resettlement or the methods employed involve coercion or are disruptive of harvesting or feeding programmes. Based on our experiences last year, we have so far found this approach more effective than high-profile public denunciations”³¹

In late 1985, SCF lorries were forcibly commandeered to transport resettlers. SCF protested privately to the RRC, but made no public statement, even when the lorries were taken on a second occasion. The public statement by a single agency was a risk, it is true. However, if the agencies had combined to make a common statement, it is very unlikely that the government would have considered expelling them all.

During 1982-4, the agencies faced acute moral dilemmas. Given the gravity of the situation and the absence of others to do similar work, they opted for the “private representations” approach. If Oxfam or SCF had spoken out and been expelled from the country, there would have been no other foreign organizations to transport food, run feeding centres, or publicise the worsening famine. However, by 1985-6, the value of this approach was much more questionable. There was now no shortage of either relief or publicity. Oxfam and SCF were no longer alone in northern Ethiopia. The politics of information in Ethiopia had changed, but the agencies continued to make private representations to the authorities rather than bring co-ordinated international pressure to bear through publicity. One reason for this was pressure from the donating public. Media coverage of relief agencies’ activities in Ethiopia was the spur for the public to increase their level of donations to charities such as Oxfam and SCF. If this level of income was to be maintained, it was necessary for relief agencies to remain active in Ethiopia, and therefore not to risk expulsion.

RRC figures for mortality during resettlement, released soon after the expulsion of MSF, show that in fact the MSF estimate was on the conservative side. A study in one resettlement site, done in collaboration with the RRC, concluded:

“The settlement of Pawe is therefore involving notable human costs higher than those caused by the famine, in spite of large investments to rapidly install the infrastructures”.³²

One of these “notable human costs” was the deaths of most of the children under five.

Since the study in Pawe, figures for the rate of deaths during resettlement have been suppressed. During June-August 1985, students from the University of Addis Ababa conducted a survey among newly-arriving resettlers in Gambella and Metekel. The Gambella settlers came from the famine-affected regions, and data from this survey have been published, which reveal a life expectancy of around six years - probably the lowest ever measured.³³

The report makes no mention of the time that the resettlers spent in transit from their homes, and the possibility of deaths occurring during that time. Instead, all the deaths are attributed to the famine which people were supposedly fleeing, with the conclusion that “the delicate balance between population and resources in northern Ethiopia has been disturbed and Malthusian checks have begun to operate”.³⁴ The Metekel resettlers did not come from a famine-affected area, and the death rates revealed by this survey were not released, presumably for fear that a high death rate would contradict the “findings” of the Gambella survey, and ascribe the deaths to the resettlement process, and not the alleged “Malthusian checks” that provided the logic for it.

The Politics of Humanitarianism

Until October 1984, the political issues affecting the famine received little coverage in the west because of the general indifference to the famine itself. After October 1984 they received little coverage because the provision of humanitarian relief to Ethiopia had become a political necessity for western governments. A government that withheld aid on political grounds, or an agency that spoke out and risked expulsion, would be accused of playing politics with the starving. The newly-fashionable post- Band Aid humanitarianism demanded action in Ethiopia. This helped to solve the problem of famine in the short term. In the longer term, however, it facilitated

ensorship of the man-made causes of the famine, which left the Ethiopian peasants as vulnerable to famine as before.

Endnotes:

6. Mesfin 1986
7. RRC, 1984
8. Cutler, 1988, pp.365-7
9. Cutler, p. 362
10. Kent, 1987
11. Cutler, 1988, p.362.
12. Gill, 1986, p.44
13. Harrison and Palmer, 1986, p.2
14. Ambirajan, 1976, p.5. Similar attitudes were voiced with regard to the famine in Ireland in the 1840s.
15. RRC, 1985, p. 174
16. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, quoted in *Index on Censorship*, 1986, p. 17
17. Clapham, 1988, pp. 191-2
18. SWB, ME 7785, 27 October 1984
19. SWB, ME 7787-9, 30 October - 1 November 1984
20. RRC, 1985, pp. 171-4
21. Cohen, 1987
22. Harrison and Palmer, 1986
23. Eg.: *The Guardian*, "Ethiopia faces killer drought"; *The Times*, "Ethiopian drought threatens millions"; *International Herald Tribune*, "Relief official fears that thousands could die in Ethiopian drought"; all on 17 February 1983
24. Dessalegn, 1987; Clapham, 1988, p. 169
25. RRC, 1985, pp. 180 and 231
26. Clapham, 1988, pp. 208-9
27. SWB ME 7788, 31 October 1984
28. Jansson, Harris and Penrose, 1987, pp. 25-6
29. Simon Winchester in the *Sunday Times*, 27th March 1983
30. "Oxfam Nurse says Ethiopia 'Blackmails' Refugees", *African Business*, January 1986
31. "Oxfam Outlines its Approach in Ethiopia", *African Business*, February 1986,
32. Sivini, 1986, p.235. The settlement site was chosen by Colonel Mengistu, during a helicopter tour
33. Asmerom, 1989
34. Asmerom, 1989, p. 251

FURTHER FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

Northern Ethiopia had two relatively good years of rain in 1985 and 1986 but drought occurred again in 1987. Since many rural communities had been impoverished by the famine of 1982-5 and therefore had not had time to build up their reserves of grain and assets in the form of animals they were more vulnerable to famine than had been the case five years earlier. Although one year of drought does not normally precipitate mass starvation, people were acutely short of food.

In October 1987 relief agency staff in the affected areas, however, were not alarmed by the extent of the drought because central Wollo was still green and they believed that people further north had resources to fall back upon. However, the international press began to report that millions faced starvation, and that conditions were “worse than 1984”. Western donors immediately responded with huge shipments of food aid. In August 1987, the RRC estimated the country’s relief food needs at 1.3 million tonnes of grain, almost three times its March 1984 request, and, ironically, was accused of under-estimation by the donors. Within seven months the RRC target had been reached by pledges of grain, including some from the USSR. Whereas in 1984, the British government took four months to merely consider the RRC’s request and gave only 29,500 tonnes within a ten-month period, in August 1987 the response was immediate: 74,500 tonnes were donated and delivered within four months.

The quantities of food delivered would have provided more than a year’s ration for each person defined by the government as “in need” - and many of these could not even be reached from government controlled areas. At this stage, with the memories of the 1982-5 famine still fresh, both the media and donors were clearly determined to respond to the humanitarian need and not to be embarrassed yet again. However, the man-made aspects of the famine were not publicised. This allowed the Ethiopian government to continue with military offensives, human rights violations, and disastrous agricultural policies, in the knowledge that the western donors would probably pay little attention to these abuses, and generously provide famine relief.

Aid agencies, too, continued to follow the policy of private representation to the Ethiopian government rather than speaking out publicly. A famine in Wolaita, caused by coercive agricultural policies, is one example and the shooting of 20 people who were trying to escape resettlement in Korem in January 1988 is another. Private representations may well have helped to prevent the repetition of similar incidents; we cannot know because the information has not been made public. However, the return of famine in 1989-90, accompanied by programmes of coercive social engineering, such as

'villagisation', and continued mass conscription, provides grounds for scepticism about the effectiveness of such an approach.

WESTERN SUDAN 1983-5

At the same time as northern Ethiopia was suffering great drought and famine, similar conditions were developing in the western Sudanese regions of Darfur and Kordofan. This famine received no substantial amounts of relief until very late in the day, but for reasons different from those which prevailed in Ethiopia:

'The Breadbasket of the Arab World'

During the 1970s, the government of Sudan, under Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri, embarked upon ambitious development plans. These included a programme to turn Sudan into 'the breadbasket of the Arab world'. The idea was that the surpluses of the oil-producing Arab nations would be invested in a large expansion of mechanised agriculture in Sudan. In pursuit of this, Sudan borrowed billions of dollars and turned over huge tracts of forest, pasture and small-holder plots to mechanised farming. Nimeiri invested a great deal of Sudan's national prestige into the success of the 'breadbasket strategy'. He also needed a constant inflow of Arab and other foreign money in order to reward his reluctant supporters and thereby guarantee the stability of his government. Such a style of economic management was not conducive to successful development. In 1978 Sudan ran into deep economic crisis. This coincided with hunger in the Provinces of Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal. (See map, Fig. 5). Reporting on these food shortages was prohibited in order not to prejudice the continued inflow of Arab 'bread basket' money. When a message concerning the situation from the Commissioner of Bahr el Ghazal was broadcast, the police arrested the broadcasters responsible.

In the early 1980s, believing Sudan to be a food-surplus country, the government did not develop any famine early-warning system per se. However, the Department of Statistics within the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health and several large regional development programmes all collected information on matters relevant to famine, such as rainfall, crop

production, and disease prevalence. The number of trained staff able to observe and measure western Sudan's slide into famine was greater than those present in northern Ethiopia.

In 1983, the economic crisis intensified and the western regions of Kordofan and Darfur were stricken by drought. To have called for foreign relief aid at this stage would have been tantamount to an admission of the failure of the 'breadbasket' plan. In mid-1984 the drought worsened. At that very moment the western donors, notably the USA, began to balk at providing the massive transfers of foreign assistance that had kept Nimeiri in power.³⁵ As the western donors failed him, Nimeiri turned for financial aid to the Arab countries - the same financiers of the 'breadbasket' plan. Nimeiri denied the existence of the famine in the west of Sudan for as long as possible.

However, during 1983-5 he faced concerted opposition from different groups within Sudan. He was opposed in Darfur by Governor Ahmad Diraige, in the south by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and in Khartoum by an alliance of trades unions and professional associations, including the Doctors' Union. These opposition groups all publicised the famine from October 1984. Even government ministries produced information that contradicted the President's line. This pressure finally forced Nimeiri to make a general appeal for aid in January 1985.

Regional Famine 1983-4

In 1983, the Ministry of Agriculture assessed the food production by the northern parts of Darfur and Kordofan as 25% of normal. In the summer of 1984 the rains were even worse. Grain production in the whole of Darfur and Kordofan was 37% of the average for the previous five years, falling to as little as 18% in northern Kordofan. Crop losses were proportionately greater than in Ethiopia. While these precise figures were available only in January 1985, the overall picture was known from September 1984, and was predicted two months earlier in July.

Up until the middle of 1984, the famine was restricted to northern Darfur and northern Kordofan. In this period, the main attempt to publicise and relieve the famine was made by the Regional Government of Darfur.³⁶ In December 1983, Governor Ahmad Diraige announced that the region faced famine. His

announcement met with no response. He repeated it, and then resigned in protest. The Regional Government began its own meagre food distribution. The FAO sent a mission to assess Darfur's relief food needs, which recommended in March 1984 that 39,000 tonnes of grain would be needed before October. The Central Government in Khartoum intervened and cut the estimate to 7,000 tonnes. Conditions continued to deteriorate and on 31 July Nimeiri was forced to declare Darfur a 'disaster region'. This declaration amounted to a command to all local government staff to direct their efforts towards famine relief; it was not an appeal for international assistance. No mention was made of Kordofan, where conditions were equally bad. Unlike Darfur, Kordofan is not a peripheral region, but was a major focus of the 'breadbasket' strategy.

National Famine 1984-5

President Nimeiri hoped that good rains in 1984 would mean a return to normality. Unfortunately the rains again failed, over a wider area than before. The famine intensified and large numbers of destitute drought migrants began to congregate in Omdurman, the twin city of Khartoum. The famine came to town and could no longer be ignored. On 2 November, the Sudan Socialist Union, Sudan's only political party at that date, asked the citizens of Omdurman to give help to the drought migrants encamped around the city. Nimeiri's response, however, was first to deny that the migrants were a symptom of famine, and then to try to remove them. On 3 November, Nimeiri said: "The situation with respect to food security and health is reassuring."³⁷ A week later, he ordered the forced return of all the drought migrants around Omdurman to their rural homes.³⁸

Meanwhile, famine became a national political issue. On 15 November, the radio of the rebel guerilla movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), condemned the government for paying no attention to the famine.³⁹ On 26 November, a group of leading doctors in the Ministry of Health published a report on famine conditions and the Ministry of Agriculture released its estimate that 160,000 tonnes of food relief was needed for Kordofan and Darfur.⁴⁰ However, Nimeiri continued to insist that the problem was confined to refugees from Ethiopia and Chad and other peripheral

groups. Following the public estimates for food aid needs, "President Nimeiri confirmed . . . that Sudan had not asked for aid from anybody but it welcomes assistance in order to combat drought, particularly as Sudan bears the burden of being host to thousands of refugees from neighbouring states".⁴¹ This was the official government line: no national food problem existed. Thus Sudan was not included on the FAO's list of drought-affected African countries. In December, an estimate of Sudan's food needs was worked out jointly by FAO, World Food Programme (WFP), and the Ministry of Agriculture. This identified a deficit of 288,000 tonnes of production and existing import arrangements, compared with consumption needs. In the first week of January, USAID increased this estimate to 934,000 tonnes. The USA was Sudan's biggest aid donor: Nimeiri had to take notice. On 10 January 1985, more than a year after the famine in Kordofan and Darfur was widespread and visible, the Sudan government finally admitted to a national food crisis and appealed for general assistance. The FAO committed food aid to Sudan on 19 January 1985.

The International Response

Nimeiri's refusal to recognize the famine was culpable. It fatally delayed a response by FAO and other UN agencies; they did not dare publicly mention the famine. However, in September 1984, the US government committed 80,000 tonnes of emergency food aid to Kordofan and Darfur. Shortly afterwards this was increased to 250,000 tonnes, (still without an official request from Nimeiri). Individuals within the government privately admitted the existence of the famine to the USA. They had the implicit backing of Nimeiri, who knew that he could not afford political unrest in the western provinces. The USA sent the food aid because Sudan was a strategic ally, and they wished to demonstrate the rewards for loyalty, as a contrast with Ethiopia. This illustrates that despite systematic censorship of the famine, a reasonably accurate appraisal of its magnitude was available for those who chose to look. It also illustrates that political considerations are paramount in the provision of relief: if the major donor has the political will to provide relief, the official government attitude can be successfully challenged.

USAID sent the food aid to Sudan before Nimeiri officially recognized the existence of the famine. Distributing it was more difficult. In the absence of a government invitation, the UN agencies were not able to start food distribution programmes. USAID also had to be cautious about referring to the food aid, since officially there was no famine. Partly as a result of this, over one third of the food was earmarked for sale to the 'beneficiaries'. For several months in late 1984, USAID searched for a relief agency which could act as a partner and oversee the distribution. After several false starts, SCF was chosen for Darfur and CARE, an American relief organisation, for Kordofan. Neither agency had the managerial or logistical capacity to implement immediately, within a few months, a huge food relief programme. The food distribution programmes only began to function efficiently in September 1985, one year after USAID had made its first commitment. Without a public declaration of the emergency, the relief agencies' scope for action was severely reduced, the famine relief was both delayed and poorly targeted and thus far less effective than it should have been. An estimated 200,000 people died in Darfur and Kordofan due to the famine: this number could have been far lower had there been an early response.

Disaster Tourism

The Sudan famine illustrates two further points. One is related to the 'discovery' of the famine in early 1985 by the international media. One of the first references to the famine in Sudan in the international English-speaking press was an article in *The Times* on 14 November 1984. But, until February 1985, most press coverage concerned refugees from Ethiopia. A typical headline ran: "Influx of starving refugees brings food crisis to Sudan".⁴² Most press coverage of the famine followed the official announcement of famine, it did not precede it. However, once the famine had been 'discovered', journalists competed with each other to file stories of horror. After the scoop of Korem in October 1984 by the BBC, journalists rushed around Sahelian Africa trying to scoop similar stories. In February 1985, famine in western Sudan was exposed.⁴³ By this time, the media fascination with starvation was such that the phenomenon of 'disaster tourism' began to emerge for the first time. Journalists, politicians and officials of relief agencies toured famine-stricken

areas, visiting feeding centres and assessing the prospects. Seeing the worst victims of famine and anxious not to understate the problem, they predicted literally millions of starvation deaths - predictions which fortunately did not materialise.⁴⁴

Endnotes:

35. Brown, 1988
36. de Waal, 1989, pp.205-6
37. SWB, ME 7792, 5 November 1984
38. SWB, ME 7799, 13 November 1984
39. SWB, ME 7804, 19 November 1984
40. *Africa Economic Digest*, 23 November 1984
41. SWB, ME 7804, 19 November 1984
42. *The Times*, 21st December 1984
43. The first reports on western Sudan appeared in *The Guardian* on 22 February (Nick Cater) and the *Daily Telegraph* on 23 February (Barry O'Brien)
44. de Waal, 1989, pp 20-3, 195-6

FAMINE IN THE RED SEA HILLS

While USAID was rushing to transport relief food a thousand miles from Port Sudan to the far west of Darfur, another famine was occurring in the very hinterland of Port Sudan itself, the Red Sea Hills. This famine had started in 1982. It was both censored by the government and ignored by USAID.

Whereas Darfur and Kordofan were important political constituencies which needed to be placated, the Red Sea Hills were politically marginal.

Fortunately, the severity of the famine in the Red Sea Hills was recognized by the end of 1984, and some food relief destined for the western regions was diverted there. Without the simultaneous famine in the other regions, the Red Sea Hills would have received nothing. Had Darfur and Kordofan not been areas of political importance to the Sudan Government, and therefore of concern to the USA, they too would have received nothing.

In Sudan in 1984-5, the potentially disastrous consequences of Nimeiri's censorship of news about the famine were mitigated by the political and strategic concerns of the Sudan government and the USA.

SOUTHERN SUDAN 1986-9

In Ethiopia during 1982-4, the government cried 'famine' but the donors did not listen. In Sudan in 1984, the government censored the famine but the USA responded. During 1986-9 in southern Sudan, there was a famine of exceptional severity, which was concealed by the Sudan government, with the complicity of the western aid donors.

A Wholly Deliberate Famine

War precipitated the famine in southern Sudan during 1986-9. The Sudan government was fighting the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Both sides used military strategies which had the quite foreseeable effect of reducing the civilian population in the war zones to famine conditions. The SPLA laid siege to garrison towns in the south, and prevented commercial and relief food reaching the towns. The government prevented food from reaching the SPLA-controlled rural areas. The government armed and supported militias, who raided and plundered rural communities in Dinka areas (the Dinka form the core of support for the SPLA). The raiders stole cattle, burned crops and grain stores, and drove the people from their land. The army itself and the SPLA also followed similar tactics during counter-insurgency operations. By 1988 between one third and one half of the southern population was displaced: they had fled their homes for local towns, northern Sudan, or Ethiopia. The famine death rates recorded in camps for displaced people in the middle of 1988 were up to four times as great as the worst recorded in Ethiopia during 1984.⁴⁵

The famine of 1986-9 reached its nadir in 1988. However, it had been developing at least since the beginning of 1986; in February Winston Pratticy, the UN Resident Representative in Sudan estimated that 960,000 people in southern Sudan faced famine. "I think a lot of people will certainly die" he said,⁴⁶ and appealed for a 'food truce' to allow relief to reach famine-affected civilians in the war zones. The appeal was unsuccessful. In May that year, reports in the international press told of 600,000 people driven from their homes by militia activities in one province alone.⁴⁷ In June, the Sudanese churches and a group of foreign relief agencies launched an appeal for relief for the famine-stricken areas, and a food truce, which they

saw as an essential precondition for a relief operation. Mark Duffield, Oxfam Field Director, said:

“Aid agencies decided to bring out the statement because they think it is getting near the end of the line in southern Sudan. There’s going to be nothing left in the south”⁴⁸

Nothing came of the appeals for a food truce in 1986. Three years and at least 300,000 lives later, the Sudan government and the SPLA finally agreed to essentially the same proposal. This agreement was implemented on 1 April 1989, only two months after Sudan’s western donors, most importantly the USA, had decided to change their policies towards Sudan and press for a ceasefire and the free passage of relief. During the intervening three years the war and famine had intensified and much of southern Sudan had become an uninhabited wasteland. The story of the western donors’ failure to respond in these years is closely connected to the censorship and management of information surrounding the famine. There were two ways in which the donors failed to respond. From mid-1986 until October 1988, they refused publicly to recognize the seriousness of the famine. In addition, and for several months longer, they refused to recognise that the famine could only be alleviated if there were a ceasefire.

Government Censorship

During 1986, the Sudan government’s policy of suppressing and distorting information about the famine was developing. One instance was the treatment of Mike Kilongson, a Sudanese journalist who worked in Juba, the southern regional capital, and who frequently provided material for the BBC. On 13 March 1986 he filed reports on the developing famine, thus contradicting public pronouncements by the Governor, Peter Cirillo, who repeatedly assured the press that there were no food shortages. The following day Mike Kilongson was arrested. He tells his own story:

“After I had filed my reports, I was taken by plainclothes police to the military torture camp. Before I was handed over to the military, I was told that I should have reported an abundance of food in Equatoria region, but if there was a problem it was only because the people didn’t have enough money with which to buy it”.⁴⁹

He was subsequently detained, under very poor conditions, for two months.⁵⁰ Towards the end of the year, the central government embarked upon a more comprehensive campaign of disinformation. In December, a group of private relief agencies estimated that the relief food needs for the south for the first six months of 1987 amounted to 71,000 tonnes. Normal practice was for the Sudanese RRC to endorse the figure, and to use it as the basis of an appeal to the donors for food and resources to transport the food. Not only did the RRC refuse to endorse the figure, but it tried to discredit it. The RRC insisted that relief food was already on its way to Tuba and other famine-stricken areas. They insisted that 6,000 tonnes of food had been recently delivered to Juba.⁵¹ This was known to be untrue, but served to undermine the agencies' contention that Tuba was about to run out of food. Pretending that these mythical food deliveries were providing a 'breathing space', the RRC claimed that the South's need for relief would start in April at the earliest -four months after the relief agencies' estimate. The RRC also said that a train of relief food was arriving in Wau - an absurd claim because the railway had been put out of action two years before when the SPLA destroyed the bridge over the river Lol. From then until October 1988, the Sudan government refused to endorse any appeal for famine relief for the population in the south, and refused to declare the south a food emergency area. Meanwhile it actively prevented food from reaching the needy southern population.⁵²

The attitude of the donors was one of disinterest in the famine but diplomatic support to the government, which was viewed as friendly and pro-western. This disinterest amounted to censorship, comparable to that in Ethiopia during 1982-4. It stood in marked contrast to the huge international concern with the perceived impending famine in Ethiopia during 1987-8. The relief community was more concerned with the possible famine in Ethiopia than with the exceptionally severe famine already occurring in Sudan.

Donor Silence

Between February and May 1988 the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee held a series of hearings on famine in the Horn of Africa.⁵³ On 17 February, the following exchange took place between Michael Welsh MP and Martin Bax of Christian Aid, which illustrates the Committee's 'passive

ensorship' of news of the Sudanese famine, and their much greater interest in the problem of Ethiopian refugees in north-east Sudan:

Mr Welsh: "Are we saying that if some things are not done shortly we shall have a crisis in southern Sudan?"

Mr Bax: "I think we should say there is a crisis in southern Sudan now".

Mr Welsh: "May I ask you about refugees from Ethiopia?"⁵⁴

On 4 May, Mr N. Hudson of the Africa Division of the Foreign Office told the Committee:

"The questions that we were discussing earlier about starvation and deprivation in Ethiopia and the uncertainty as to whether there really is such a situation at the moment do not apply in the case of southern Sudan. There is no uncertainty in the case of southern Sudan".⁵⁵

The Committee hearings and reports devoted nine times as much time to the supposed famine in Ethiopia as they did to the actual famine in Sudan.

Shipments of emergency relief were delivered in similar proportions.

This distortion of concerns was found even among relief agencies in Sudan itself, who were more worried about the possible inflow of drought refugees from Ethiopia, than the actually-occurring flows of displaced people from the south. In April 1988 a train left the famine-stricken town of Aweil in Bahr el Chazal, southern Sudan, carrying several thousand destitute famine victims. It was the first train for six months and it travelled as far as Khartoum. Six children died on arrival at Khartoum railway station. A senior relief agency official telexed his headquarters:

"We have a real emergency in Bahr el Ghazal. It can be estimated with some accuracy that 100,000 people (minimum) have left Bahr el Ghazal in two months. This is a catastrophe. The aid community here have been too busy watching the Tiger [Tigray and Eritrea] border and have failed to notice the children dying in Khartoum Central Station".

Belated Recognition

The western donors were finally alerted to news of the famine in September-October 1988. This was not through the "discovery" of the famine by the press, because stories of the famine had been carried since 1986 in the international press. The story was revived by Deborah Scroggins of the

Atlanta Journal and Constitution who covered the famine in a series of articles. Following these, on 28 June 1988, the paper carried an editorial entitled "Sudan hides its famine." As in the case of Ethiopia four years earlier, it was a coincidence of factors, mostly unrelated to the famine. The Sudan government had earlier in the year asked a UN mission to study the problems of displaced southerners, in part with a view to obtaining assistance so that these people could be resettled as a cheap labour force in the north. The mission, headed by Charles Le Muniere, happened to arrive in September 1988, one month after Khartoum had experienced its worst floods for forty years. The floods attracted international attention and assistance - everything that the relief workers in the south had been fruitlessly appealing for over several years. Some of the journalists were drawn off to see the problem in the south. What had been planned as a routine UN mission unexpectedly became the focus of international attention. Two prominent Americans, Julia Taft of the Office for US Foreign Disaster Assistance and the late Congressman Mickey Leland, travelled to Sudan and became personally involved in the twin causes of peace and famine relief.

Only one important factor in the belated recognition of the famine can be attributed to the nature of the famine itself. This was the unprecedented scale of mass migration of famine victims from the south.

Thus in late 1988, the story of the famine in southern Sudan broke. However, the major donors still tried to pretend that the famine had no connection with the politics of the civil war. When he was in Sudan, Charles Le Munière of the UN was comprehensively briefed on the political, military, and human rights background to the famine. Yet the UN appeal document of October 1988, which resulted from Le Munière's visit, made no mention of the SPLA, nor of human rights.⁵⁶

At the same time, the USA failed to make any public pronouncements that attached blame to the Sudan government for causing the famine. The relief programmes that sprang from this policy of politically-naive humanitarianism quickly ran into insurmountable obstacles: the government appropriated the relief programmes for its own ends where possible, and obstructed the remainder. In Abyei, a relief program for the displaced was controlled by the

army, who directed most of the relief away from the famine victims, and refused to allow SCF and Oxfam to become active in the area.

Politically-Informed Relief

During the months from October 1988, a group of private relief agencies, led by Oxfam and SCF, lobbied the western donors for a change in policy, which would emphasise the neutrality and accountability of the relief programme and therefore make it more difficult for the army to hijack relief food, and for free access to all the famine-stricken populations. The donors were now committed to action and the failures of the UN relief plan opened their eyes to the underlying causes of the famine. Simultaneously, a group of US Congressmen visited SPLA-held areas of Sudan and argued that people in these areas needed famine relief too. Combined with the manifest failure of the UN appeal, these pressures succeeded. The donors' position changed in early 1989 and they insisted on the free passage of relief to all civilians in the war zone, a condition that was swiftly complied with by both the Sudan government and the SPLA.

The International Press: A Restricted Role

The international press were foiled in their attempts to cover the famine in southern Sudan. They frequently reported on food shortages and the activities of relief agencies and also, on occasions, drew attention to the political and military factors underlying the famine. Nevertheless this had little impact. Both the 'exposure' of the famine in late 1988 and the policy change by the donors in early 1989 were much more closely tied to lobbying by relief agencies and concerned politicians, than to coverage by the media. Intensive journalistic coverage followed these policy changes, rather than provoking them. This was for several reasons: The main reason was restricted access for journalists, who could not obtain permits to travel to rural areas of the south. They mostly travelled with relief workers to government-held towns and, therefore, did not visit the areas inaccessible to relief. Thus most press coverage of southern Sudan during 1986-8 consisted of the story "aid is getting through". While a little aid was getting through to the areas to which relief agency personnel had access (usually Juba), this story-line was not true for other areas and allowed an

unwarranted degree of complacency. A second and related reason was that relief agencies and journalists made repeated claims that several million people faced famine and starvation. These claims could not be verified because neither the agencies nor the journalists had access to rural areas in the south. The western donors considered these unverifiable claims to be unreliable and developed a cynicism redolent of Ethiopia during 1982-4. The journalists needed pictures to substantiate the numbers at risk: these were not available.

Relief Agencies: Self-Censorship

Another set of reasons for the restricted role of the press relates to the connection between war and famine, and self-censorship by relief agencies and their associates. The story of the famine in southern Sudan was complex, and the government's role in it insidious, and implicitly endorsed by the western donors. This was a difficult story for journalists to relate, even if they were able to be wholly honest but, complete honesty was not encouraged by most of the relief agencies. In 1986, the UN Resident Representative, Winston Prattley, was expelled after he tried to start a relief airlift to the south. In 1987, four relief agencies working in the south were expelled for their advocacy of famine relief. The relief agencies therefore encouraged self-censorship by the journalists for fear that exposure of the causes of the famine would lead to them being permanently expelled from the country. Some journalists exercised self-censorship for similar reasons. One freelance journalist, Carol Berger, was not allowed into Sudan after publishing newspaper articles which pointed to the government role in creating the famine.

Lastly, Sudan is not Ethiopia. A mild famine in Ethiopia has, since 1984, the power to attract far more emotion and coverage than a much more severe famine elsewhere in Africa.

The Sudanese Press Ignore Famine

During 1986-9, Sudan had a relatively 'free' press. Forty news papers and journals expressed political opinions ranging from communism to Islamic fundamentalism, and were often severely critical of the government. Journalists on the independent al Ayyam, the communist al Medan and the

English-language south ern-oriented Sudan Times were particularly active in investigating government corruption and human rights abuses. However, this press gave little coverage to the war and the famine, for a number of reasons. One was the example of the treatment of Mike Kilong son in 1986; few journalists were prepared to risk what he had endured. A second reason was difficulty of access: travel permits were hard to obtain and transport in famine areas was difficult and dangerous. One journalist was killed by a landmine in Equatoria Province in 1987. A third problem was the close connection between the famine and the war. The government restricted news about the war and it was impossible to write about the famine without also considering the war. Siddig al Zeilai, a journalist investigating militia activities, was imprisoned without trial in August 1989, and remains in detention. Most important, however, was the solidarity and conformism of the mainstream newspapers which catered for a reading public in Khartoum who considered the war and famine, at worst, as embarrassing irritations. For example, the arrival of the train from Aweil in Khartoum, carrying its starving passengers, was not reported in a single Arabic news paper.

Endnotes:

45. See: Raymond Bonner, A Reporter at Large: Famine *New Yorker*, 13 March 1989.
46. *International Herald Tribune*, 28 February 1986
47. Sheila Rule, "Khartoum Suspected of Role in Raids on African Tribesmen", *International Herald Tribune*, 7 May 1986
48. Gill Lusk, "Appeal for Truce to Save Sudan Starving", *The Times*, 14 June 1986
49. Kilongson, 1986, p17
50. Griffin, 1986
51. Technical Coordinating Committee, Khartoum, 15 December 1986
52. Africa Watch, 1990
53. Foreign Affairs Committee, 1988
54. Foreign Affairs Committee, 1988, p.40
55. Foreign Affairs Committee, 1988, p.90
56. United Nations, 1988

THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA: UNPREDICTABLE ALLIES

Since the experience of Ethiopia in October 1984, relief agencies regard the international press as a natural ally in their struggles to attract the attention of the donors to a famine. In the immediate aftermath of Band Aid the press has played this role across Sahelian Africa, notably in western Sudan. In Ethiopia,

the press has continued to galvanise the donors on behalf of the relief agencies on several occasions, notably in 1987 and 1989. However, the experience of southern Sudan demonstrates that 'rescue' by the press cannot be relied upon.

After October 1984, the private relief agencies active in northern Ethiopia gained moral stature vis-a-vis the western donors, because the agencies had predicted the famine but the donors had not responded. This moral stature might be considered a great asset in lobbying donors: the agencies could threaten to take unilateral action to expose a famine and embarrass the donors again. However, this ploy seems to work only in Ethiopia. In Sudan in June 1986, UNICEF, Oxfam and other relief agencies did precisely that: they documented the existence of the famine, predicted what would happen without relief and specified the conditions needed for effective relief. The donors did nothing and the agencies' supposed moral stature was not enough to shame them into action. Two and a half years later, the agencies were vindicated.

When acknowledgement of the famine finally became a political necessity for western governments in October 1988, they at first envisaged a non-political humanitarian response. In Ethiopia, the response would have gone no further: the 'Band Aid factor' would have ensured that only the most narrowly 'humanitarian' response was possible. However, in Sudan this was not the case. The press coverage was relatively modest, and combined attention to the humanitarian needs of the famine victims with an analysis of the political and military factors behind the suffering. As a result, Oxfam and SCF were prepared to take a more overtly political line with their pronouncements and lobbying concerning the nature of the famine relief programme needed, and act in ways that bore the risk of expulsion. The western donors were also able to play politics, in order to obtain a ceasefire - the precondition for a relief programme. Led by the Netherlands, they used the leverage they had with the Sudan government in the form of aid. On 1 February 1989, the USA suspended concessionary sales of wheat to Sudan, (i.e. it stopped regular food aid). This action, severe though it was, was instrumental in forcing the Sudan government to change its policies and agree to a ceasefire - after

which the aid was resumed. Had the USA suspended food aid to Ethiopia, the public outcry would have been overwhelming.

The famine of 1986-9 in southern Sudan thus presents a number of problems for the straightforward view that a free press will publicise and thereby prevent a famine, and that massive publicity is necessarily a good thing. This famine was not covered by the press in Khartoum, and the relatively-modest international publicity on the humanitarian aspects of the famine gave the relief agencies and western donors the political space in which to address the underlying political causes of the famine.

CONCLUSION

Information on impending and major famines is always available for those who choose to inquire. However, that information may be deliberately discredited by a government (as in Sudan in 1984 and again in 1986). The information may be neglected and thus effectively suppressed by host and donor governments or international organisations, as in Ethiopia during 1982-4. It may be distorted or selectively presented, as in Ethiopia after 1984, and in Sudan in late 1988. Finally, the information may be exaggerated, as in Ethiopia during 1987-8.

The response to famine by the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan and the western aid donors is dictated largely by political factors. These political factors, for example, encouraged US relief for the Sudanese famine of 1984, but not for the simultaneous famine in Ethiopia. Other political factors determined western response to the drought in Ethiopia in 1987, but not for the famine in Sudan at the same time.

Publicity has always been a political factor influencing response to famine. Since late 1984, Band Aid and the growth of disaster tourism, publicity has become a more powerful political factor than ever before in Ethiopia. Famine in Ethiopia has become part of ordinary discourse and popular culture in western countries. The 'Band Aid factor' continues to govern the depiction of and response to famines in Ethiopia, and has effectively prevented the censorship of information about the existence of famines in northern Ethiopia. However,

the 'Band Aid factor' distracts attention from the need to address the political causes underlying the famines in Ethiopia. The press tends to misrepresent famines and the misrepresentation grows as the media coverage increases. Press attention to famines in Ethiopia and Sudan is essential. However, it is also essential that the coverage is politically informed. Over-hyped naively 'humanitarian' reporting can be as bad as no reporting at all.

The 'Band Aid factor' appears to work only unpredictably and briefly in other famine-stricken countries such as Sudan, making it more difficult to publicise famines in Sudan and raise resources for relief programmes, but also makes it easier in some ways to address the political problems underlying famine. The peculiar difficulties in reporting famine include too heavy a reliance on individual's subjective perceptions or non-perceptions, and sheer luck. Visiting journalists without expertise in assessing famine are prone to fall back on personal observations and intuitions that may be far from accurate, and their editors' decisions about whether and how to run their stories may be based on an even less informed attitude. When circumstances converge to provide high-profile media coverage of a famine, it is often due largely to chance coincidence of people and events.

There is very little analytical coverage of African famines in the press. This can be blamed in part on the governments of the countries concerned and in part on the bureaucratic international relief organisations. The media, too, must take its share of the blame. Accurate and timely portrayal of famines in Ethiopia and Sudan remains a challenge. Before it is met, too many relief programmes will continue to be sadly inappropriate, and rural people will remain needlessly vulnerable to famines brought about by war and disastrous government policies including censorship.

The governments of Ethiopia and Sudan must, in the last analysis, bear the responsibility for suppressing and distorting information on famines which condemn thousands of their citizens to a premature death.

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