

Sir Bob Geldof: Defending the indefensible

The year was 1984. A famine of unimaginable proportions was ravaging the northern region of Ethiopia. Besides the famine, that part of Ethiopia was also in the midst of a multi dimensional bloody civil war that took so many lives and destroyed infrastructure. The fighting parties were the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), operating in a close alliance, launching a coordinated political and military operation against the regime in Addis Ababa. In 1991, the civil war came to an abrupt conclusion and as a result EPLF declared Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia while TPLF abandoned its program of succession from Ethiopia, preferring to form a central government ruling the entire country instead of just one province of Tigray.

The tragic famine of 1984-85 understandably pierced the consciousness of all citizens of the world, prompting a massive fundraising mobilization that managed to collect millions of dollars from around the world in a very short period of time. In the spirit of human solidarity, people of all ages pitched in to assist their fellow human beings in a far away land. Here in Canada, for example, school children launched a '30 hour famine' campaign, donating their allowances and cost of food for thirty hours, which they could have spent otherwise. It was a demonstration of remarkable human solidarity and connectedness in a time of suffering and anguish.

Obviously, in circumstances such as the 1984-85 famine in Ethiopia our collective response is driven by emotional instinct and urgency with a single purpose of saving lives. Which certainly is a natural and genuine reaction from the point of an individual citizen. Understandably, under such tragic circumstances of emergency, donor individuals are not preoccupied with the details of aid delivery, accounting or transparency. Their primary objective is to reach out to their fellow human beings and do 'something.' Hence, they offer whatever they can hoping and believing their donations will be delivered fully to those who desperately need it. Clearly, the full responsibility of transparency and accountability ultimately lies on the shoulders of those who are on the 'front lines' of aid delivery and management both from donor and receiving countries.

Unfortunately, this is where things get murky and perplexing because to our surprise there are spectacular failures by aid agencies and organizers of aid efforts to carefully account for and monitor the spending. Particularly, questions such as how is the accounting and transparency of aid delivery monitored? What are the mechanisms used to prevent aid money intended to save lives potentially being used to purchase weapons used to slaughter innocent civilians? These and other relevant questions have been often avoided and even ignored in the process of emergency food aid delivery in a conflict situation. While such emergency aid certainly did save countless lives, there is also a growing body of evidence that it is also prone to abuse and could be diverted for non-humanitarian purposes. Particularly for the purpose of purchasing military hardware and building of a repressive political machine, such as the one built by the TPLF to brutalise the people of Ethiopia for the last 18 years.

The recent investigative report by Martin Plaut of the BBC has hit a nerve among all parties involved in the food aid delivery of the 1984-85 famine in Ethiopia. The angry reaction from Sir Bob Geldof, in particular, was surprising and most certainly unwarranted. I could only guess why Sir Bob Geldof could react with such fury, as if he had every detail of the accounting work regarding how the Band Aid money was spent. I think the reason why Sir Bob Geldof and other aid

agencies reacted with a loud fury is simple: in the past no one dared to question or challenge the authenticity of the emergency aid delivery mechanism and its transparency. As a result, the likes of Sir Bob Geldof and NGOs built the unquestionable saintly image whose mission is saving the world and, therefore, their work is above scrutiny. Perhaps even no one is qualified to question them.

The investigative report of Mr. Plaut may have startled those who were moved by the images of 1984-85 famine because they never imagined money they donated to feed a starving child could be used to buy weapons. The fact is that, for the majority of Ethiopians and others who know the political and military dynamics of the last 30 years in Ethiopia, the news is not some spectacular discovery. In fact, since the coming of the TPLF as the government, the majority of the Ethiopian people, some publically and others in a quiet whisper, will speak of the ruthlessness of TPLF and how far this organization is willing to go in order to control the helm of power, even if it means starving citizens to death.

To put things into perspective, when the famine hit northern Ethiopia, the TPLF as an organization was less than 9 years old; an infant in any political and military measure. However, TPLF's political and military growth rate began to dramatically accelerate during and immediately following the 1984- 85 famine. The nourishment of TPLF as a political and military organization came on the back of tens of thousands of starving children, men and women. In effect this catastrophic famine became political, military, propaganda, financial and diplomatic gold mine for the TPLF.

Politically, TPLF asserted itself as a player on the international stage dealing with international aid groups and gaining recognition by the agencies as a viable force qualified to participate in the process of aid delivery, and in the process gaining access to international diplomats and heads of NGOs and charitable organizations. Before the famine, TPLF was little known in the international arena. Militarily, TPLF incorporated the food aid operation as part-and-parcel of its military strategy. By claiming that the Ethiopian government was hampering the aid delivery, TPLF frequently appealed to the international community to pressure the Ethiopian government for a safe relief passage so that it could use such arrangements to regroup and launch military operations. Propaganda-wise, the TPLF portrayed itself as a strong political group, capable of delivering food aid and collaborating with other stakeholders. Furthermore, the famine provided a propaganda niche for TPLF to admonish its opponent (the military regime) and claim that the famine was partially a result of a repressive political and economic policy of the military regime, which it clearly was.

Obviously, the most valuable fortune TPLF extracted from the famine was the financial wealth that it managed to access during the famine and in the subsequent years. As stated above, exploiting the international focus on the famine, TPLF began to assert itself as a reliable and trustworthy partner. Hence aid agencies decided to hand large sums of money so that the TPLF could purchase and distribute local grain to the starving people. In truth, this was in fact a jackpot for TPLF. A little known organization up until the famine was now basking in the glory of dealing with international aid agencies.

In the chaos and urgency of humanitarian catastrophe, aid agencies pumped a huge sum of money directly to the TPLF. This from the part of aid agencies, I believe, was a genuine effort to find a quick and practical channel to assist the needy. However, it was also naïve and to a certain extent lacks a long sighted reflection of responsibility, and it was simply driven by raw emotion, rather than a systematic and deliberate mechanism that promises not to do harm in the short and long term.

For almost two decades, the famine military complex in Ethiopia has been the core component that shaped politics and directed military strategy. Those who are starving are used and abused by TPLF to win the propaganda war and to gain international recognition and legitimacy. If there is anyone who doubts this fact he/she must be living on a different planet. Maybe we could all agree, the world of celebrities is a different planet and things are constructed, interpreted and analysed differently. In reality, though, it is utterly naïve and even preposterous to think that famine, as a phenomenon, and food aid, as a practical life saving tool are not exploited to advance a military and political objectives by all parties involved. The truth of the matter is that it has been and it continues to be.

In the end, the highlight shouldn't be about Sir Bob Geldof or any other celebrity saint. This most certainly is about more than 80 million Ethiopians suffering under the tyrannical rule of TPLF, partly because of the aid money that built the political machinery of one of the most ruthless regimes in Africa, and the Ethiopian people continue to struggle to rid of the menace of Meles Zenawi and his gang. Any emergency aid or development aid, therefore, should keep the principles of Do No Harm at the forefront.

As for Sir Bob Geldof, with all due respect, his characterization of TPLF as a 'brilliant' organization is a clear demonstration of the celebrity saints' interpretation of the real world. What if someone in Ethiopia would have told him about the brilliance of the Real IRA or other political organizations in Northern Ireland? I think such decisions must be left to the Ethiopian people. To reduce a country's consciousness and right to a bag of wheat or high energy biscuits is quite insulting. The people of Ethiopia deserve democracy, freedom and justice more than a bag of wheat.

TPLF diverted the aid money to buy military hardware during the guerrilla war. Since becoming the government, administering the entire country, the regime has used food aid as a political weapon. In his recent report, the former member of TPLF and the first defence minister outlines his findings on how the government determines who gets food aid depending on the political loyalty, voting record and affiliation with the TPLF <http://www.ethiomeia.com/course/5155.html>. This clearly indicates the fact that TPLF never stopped using food aid for its own political and military objectives.

Finally, as the May 2010 national election approaches, people in Ethiopia are nervously watching the political situation very carefully. Those who know and understand the politics of Ethiopia applauded Gebremedhin Araya and others who continue to speak up about the true nature of TPLF. These individuals simply could have stayed with their former comrades and enjoyed the benefit of being a cabinet minister, Ambassador or any other high profile political position. Instead they opted for the truth, and they deserve credit for that.