

The Triumph of Humanity

October-November 1984: ETHIOPIA

On October 23, 1984, British viewers watching the BBC news saw pictures of the famine in Ethiopia and heard these words:

“Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of the night on the plain outside Korem it lights up a biblical famine now- in the 20th century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death. They flood in every day from villages hundreds of miles away, dulled by hunger, driven beyond the point of desperation... 15,000 children here now- suffering, confused, lost...

Death is all around. A child or an adult dies every twenty minutes. Korem, an insignificant town, has become a place of grief. There is not enough food for half these people... People scabble in the dirt as they go for each grain of wheat: for some, it might be the only food they have had for a fortnight or more. Those who died at night are brought at dawn to be laid at the edge of the plain, dozens of them, men, women, and children, under blankets.”

Micheal Buerk’s deliberate words and powerful phrases echoed from the skeletal frames, the despairing faces, and corpses lying in shrouds made from sacks of grain, shocking the British to their very souls. In the next week, 425 international stations picked up the footage for release, and the entire Western world was stunned by the hopelessness and horror captured through Amin’s camera. Whoever saw the Buerk/Amin footage will be haunted for the rest of their lives. Even the hardened staff of the BBC newsroom was moved to tears. After the first showing, they passed the hat and collected £200. I first saw the videotape that same month in London. It had a chilling effect even on me, who had been there.

Toward the end of October, we began to hear of increasing British media coverage of the famine through our London embassy, at that time headed by my brother, and through the BBC radio service. However, I was unaware of what awaited me as I flew to Great Britain on October 28th. I was at the time terribly discouraged and felt as helpless as the victims in their shelters. The negative reaction to our appeal of October 7th had left me certain that the donors were not going to give us the food we needed. We had depleted all our resources in Ethiopia. I left Addis for London five days after the BBC films were shown. Though I didn’t know it, Great Britain was in an uproar. The initial shock waves had been followed by an intense public desire to help, and then almost immediately by anger and demands to know why the government had done nothing to help. The Buerk/Amin films were followed on October 25th by an ITV documentary, *Bitter Harvest*, made by Peter Gill, which focused on the West’s inaction. The British government was under fire: members of parliament from every party were demanding emergency measures, opposition leaders were out for blood, journalists smelled their next big story and were packing media with reports and interviews.

Peter Gill reported:

“The food which would save them is already in store in Britain and Europe... Why don’t we give our unwanted food to save the lives of those who need it?” Hugh McKay, Director General of Save the Children, was quick to point out: “We forecast this famine 18 months ago. How much lead time does the world conscience really need? Do they really want to see children die before they believe the predictions of people like us?”

I stepped off the plane and into a storm at 7 PM on a Saturday. I was totally unprepared for what I found waiting for me. A dozen journalists suddenly besieged me, TV cameras were pointed at me, the president of the *Daily Mirror* Robert Maxwell was there shaking my hand- and so many important people were there seeking to shake hands and chat with me.....

Questions were flung at me at a furious pace by reporters. Caught unprepared, I answered as best as I could. An immense wave of relief surged through me- our voices had at last been heard and help would soon be on the way. I felt a certain thrill of victory there in front of the cameras. I was treated as a visiting dignitary, a man with an important mission. But almost immediately, there followed a profound sense of humiliation. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. In the midst of all this attention, I felt very small and insignificant.

I was there to save nine million people at death's door- that was the reason I was being given a hero's welcome. In reality, I was nothing but a beggar and part of a political system that had caused the cruelest human suffering. That was humiliation: to be forced to beg for help, to fight down your pride, and plead with strangers to grant you life again. And not just impartial strangers, but people whose governments we had been viciously condemning for years in every available public forum. Our existence now relied on their whim.

I thought of my people back in the shelters who had nothing, yet always maintained a sense of dignity, even when forced into shame of begging for their lives. There in London, I too felt this battle between pride and shame, gratitude and humiliation as I struggled to maintain my dignity. Then a barrage of questions began that was designed to embarrass me and the government. Disgust was added to humiliation. I was in the terrible position of having to lie to cover up the wrongs of others.

I had been to Europe and the US on several previous occasions and almost invariably had been forced to fight for the ear of the press. This time it was the other way around. The press came hunting for me, their noses to the ground, smelling an international scandal. I couldn't refuse to see them; we need them to publicize the truth about our situation. But most of their questions were politically motivated. Since I had come to Europe on my own initiative, I had no authorized answers to their embarrassing questions. I had to improvise, saying whatever I thought appropriate to my immediate task of securing help.

After the questions, I was whisked away to see the UK's Minister of Overseas Development, Timothy Raison. Again the tables were turned. A year ago it was I who had come begging to him; now he was waiting for me at his office on a Saturday night. The public, members of Parliament, and leading church officials, all were urging Prime Minister Thatcher to act immediately in the crises. Her opponents, quick to seize an opportunity, wanted to know why nothing had been done by her government before this. There was heated debate in Parliament. MP David Penhaligon demanded:

"As the Prime Minister so magnificently organized the commandeering of enough ships to carry our navy, army, air force to Falklands, will she explain why famine relief in Ethiopia presents such a problem?"

The Archbishop of Canterbury and Roman Catholic Primate of England and Wales, Basil Humes was insisting that the UK take immediate steps in concert with the rest of Europe. They wanted foreign ministers to cut the usual red tape to rush supplies to Ethiopia and even proposed an airlift by the Royal Air Force (RAF). The RAF was repeatedly mentioned as the fastest way to transport food from Europe to Ethiopia. It was a far-fetched, highly unrealistic proposal. Those who knew anything about this kind of operation understood how impossible it would be. Logistics dictated that the aircraft could not be used to ferry food on long flights from Great Britain but only for short distances within our country. The Thatcher government, however, was taking the proposal seriously. This proposal was one of the main reasons Mr. Raison waited so eagerly to see me. He wanted to tell the British public that very night that immediate action had been taken by the Thatcher cabinet.

Back home, the RRC and international community had often appealed for cargo planes to ferry food, medical supplies and other relief items, but we had civilian plans in mind- we never imagined the air force of a Western government operating inside Ethiopia. Mengistu would be outraged. Now when Mr. Raison suggested sending the RAF at once, I was shocked. He gave me no time to take it back home and discuss it; he wanted me to say Yes or No on the spot. The RFA in Ethiopia – where every poster condemned NATO aggression and denounced Western imperialism!!

I told the Minister that cargo planes would indeed be needed to transport future food donations, but that for now, I would prefer him to concentrate on the immediate needs of the starving. I gave him a long list of items, but he resisted and we could not arrive at an agreement. As I left his office in the middle of the night, very discouraged, I was met by a group of journalists outside his office. I told them that sending the RAF would do more for Britain's public relations and domestic problems than for starving Ethiopians. The next morning the media ran it this way:

“Ethiopian Relief Commissioner Rejects British Assistance.”

On that Sunday morning, just as I was leaving for New York, I had a telephone conversation with Mr. Raison that set off a chain reaction in Europe and America and changed the course of famine relief. I was told that the British government was prepared to meet my request and airlift 6,500 tons of grain and needed equipment like water drilling rigs, tents and Land Rovers. He asked me again about the RAF and I wanted desperately to agree. I called Addis to raise the proposal with the Head of State. I couldn't reach him. I felt that this was a pivotal moment for British famine relief and that to delay would be disastrous. Just before I took off for the US, I boldly gave Mr. Raison the go-ahead for two RAF Hercules planes loaded with emergency items to take off for Addis. I phoned Addis Civil Aviation and instructed them to give permission for the planes to land, telling them I would explain it to the Head of State later.

On Monday morning I called London from New York and was told the RAF planes were well on their way to Addis. I had thought that perhaps I would have another chance to talk to the Head of State and warn him, but unfortunately, the British moved too fast. British papers and BBC headlines were Royal Airforce heading to Ethiopia with emergency supplies.

A day later I got a call from Mengistu. To put it mildly, he was not at all happy to find the RAF on his doorstep. “What do you think you're doing? Is this a NATO invasion?” He delivered a verbal onslaught that left me dreading my return. But it was done, there was nothing he could do about it, and the impetus it gave to future donations was well worth all the ill will it caused me.

When I arrived in New York I experienced more of the same overwhelming public enthusiasm. In the last week of October newspapers across the USA had stepped up their reporting on the tragedy. Then on October 29, in an unusual move, *NBC Nightly News* aired four minutes of the Buerk/Amin footage. The spontaneous response that followed was unprecedented. The American public poured out expressions of sympathy, pressured their government to act, and contributed millions to relief agencies. Save the Children Fund received the most telephone calls ever recorded in its 51-year history. Again I found myself the focus of attention. Famine was news.

A setback occurred at this point. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31st October, and for a few days, the media focused almost exclusively on India. Interviews that had been arranged for me in New York were canceled to cover this more sensational story.

On November 4th, I addressed the UN General Assembly:

“Yes Mr. Chairman, one cannot help being moved by the sight of human suffering depicted in those pictures [referring to the film]. Even governments that were hitherto less than forthcoming are now following the humanitarian example of their public. We in Ethiopia are particularly touched by the goodwill and generosity shown by ordinary men and women. All this renews our faith in humanity, reinforces our confidence in international solidarity, and indeed encourages us to try even the impossible to save the lives of our unfortunate brothers and sisters.”

One of my goals on this trip had been to meet with UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar to make a personal appeal for more aid. Unlike other times when appointments with him were difficult to arrange, on this occasion, I set up a meeting in record time. I had spoken with Perez de Cuellar at the time of my previous appearance before the General Assembly, and I had also met his predecessor, Kurt Waldheim, several times. They had always treated me courteously but as an ordinary representative from an unimportant country. This time, however, Perez de Cuellar left his office to give me a warm greeting. The Secretary-General had to be seen with me, and that was why there were an unusual number of journalists and TV crews. There were cameras and TV crews. It was a ritual that was going to repeat itself on this tour every time I met an important public figure. As in London, it made me extremely uncomfortable.

Again, it felt awkward in front of the cameras. How was I supposed to act? Didn't mankind have a moral obligation to help people in need? If so, why were we making such a public spectacle out of that duty? There was a recurring mixture of feelings: anger at having to put up with this, sorrow for the starving, remorse, and guilt as I thought about the system I was serving. I was never entirely comfortable in my mind with blaming only Mengistu and his supporters I tried to make myself partly responsible for the famine. I had defended the Revolution from the start, even when I felt it had gone wrong.

As in London, I wanted to maintain a certain standard of honesty and dignity, yet it was impossible to be completely truthful. As a government representative and a member of the Central Committee, I couldn't say what I believed. I had to maintain an outward appearance of calm and righteousness to secure my position before the world community and my role as a high government official.

The November election between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale was one week away when news of the Ethiopian famine broke in the United States. Even though the polls predicted a

landslide victory for Reagan, the lack of previous significant action by the American government was potentially damaging enough to make it an election issue. The Reagan administration decided it was imperative to respond to this "new" crisis immediately because of nationwide sympathy for the dying Ethiopians.

When the news broke, the Hunger Committee of the Democratic Party wanted to leave for Ethiopia immediately. Representatives came to the Ethiopian Mission in New York to ask my permission for visas. Jessie Jackson called our ambassador to the UN and told him of his intention to leave for Addis at once. I was about to give instructions to the ambassador to issue the visas when I had a call from the State Department in Washington. Peter McPherson, the US AID Director General, wanted to see me immediately to talk about a United States emergency assistance agreement. Our ambassador was also asked to delay the departure of Jesse Jackson and the Democratic Party's delegation as much as possible. With election day so close, it was extremely important to McPherson that he, as representative of the Reagan administration, be the first American in Ethiopia.

We did delay the visa requests and I left for Washington at once. I was greeted warmly at the State Department where we hammered out draft agreements to be signed by me and Mr. McPherson. I insisted on grain, transportation and water drilling machinery, and I further stipulated that substantial amounts of the grain must be submitted directly to our government through my agency, the RRC. At one time it would have been very difficult for US AID to agree to this. Their practice had been to refuse to deal with the Ethiopian government on political grounds, but over the past year the RRC had built up its credibility. US AID had already decided before I arrived to give the RRC 50,000 tons directly, a major change of policy. McPherson agreed to most of my requests and an agreement for 180,000 tons of food assistance was signed. In addition, as in the UK, cargo planes were made part of the deal. The initial idea was to send a US Air Force detachment, but after I explained the political problems it was decided that two civilian planes would be dispatched instead. In all respects, the administration was generous and extremely receptive. For the first time in many years, an American administration had signed a government-to-government aid program with Ethiopia. As usual, we appeared before the cameras in the State Department press hall. McPherson and I exchanged some nice words and explained the

Then, that same evening, Mr. McPherson left for Ethiopia before I even had full confirmation from Addis about his arrival, his schedule, or the possibility of his seeing a senior official there. His arrival in the capital was not very welcome, hardly surprising, given the number of provocative statements he had been exchanging with the Ethiopian government. He behaved in a manner that we consider typically American: he aggressively pushed his way into everything because his party was in the middle of an election. American rhetoric, particularly from US AID, was inflammatory in the extreme. I reminded both the State Department, Congressmen, and Senators on various occasions that this only polarized relations and hindered relief efforts. I told them that the conservatives in the Reagan administration were playing into the hands of the hardliners in Creating, in fact, an unintentional alliance between them. The only result would be an adverse effect on the lives of the people we all wanted to save.

As predicted the Soviet Union decided to send 24 helicopters, 12 transport aircraft and 700 trucks to Ethiopia. The figures were almost too good to be true. I was able to report this donation to the American press and escaped embarrassing the Soviets at a great cost to myself and the cause. While I was in the United States, I received a telephone call from the Canadian Prime Minister's office informing me that the Foreign Minister, Joe Clark, would like to see me after his return from the funeral service of Mrs. Gandhi. On his way back from India he also wanted to stop over in Ethiopia to see the situation firsthand. I was also told that the Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulrooney, also wanted to see me.

Mr. Clark did stop-over in Addis and arrived in Ottawa the same day I did. Even after the long trip from Africa, he met with me immediately. I also met the Deputy Prime Minister, other Canadian officials, and of course, the press. Joe Clark had met with Mengistu and was very anxious to help. I found the same response from the public and officials in Canada that I had in the United States and Great Britain. Again, I submitted my list and invited more voluntary agencies from Canada to operate in Ethiopia. I was assured that aid would be sent at once. On my way back from the United States I stopped at London, Brussels, Geneva, Rome, and Bonn. Wherever I went, I found sympathy and enthusiasm to help. I had audiences with ministers, parliamentarians, voluntary agencies, and reporters. I submitted different kinds of requests in each country. In England, where there was a tremendous grain surplus that year, my request was for wheat. In Brussels I asked the BEC for grain and transportation subsidies. In Geneva, I met with the Red Cross, UNDRO (UN Disaster Relief Organization), UNHCR (UN High Commission for Refugees), and the Lutheran World Federation. I requested they supply more relief items and help in informing the international community.

An excellent German transport system and garage had already been set up to assist the RRC. Unfortunately, this was now 50 percent incapacitated due to breakdowns. When I visited Bonn I requested an expansion of this project, delivery of more German trucks, and spare parts. There was an instant willingness to help. Later, a group of 20 German mechanics arrived at the RRC and worked day and night to repair the machinery. What had been an auto graveyard was soon roaring with efficiency. They made all the dead vehicles spring to life. I will never forget the enthusiasm of those volunteers.

In Rome, I met Foreign Minister Andreotti at his residence for breakfast. That was the only time I had because of very tight schedules flying onwards to Germany. Italian technology is very familiar to Ethiopians, so I asked for 150 Italian trucks as well as supplementary food worth two million dollars. Andreotti told me (and I remember his words very well: "In the competition to help Ethiopia, I can assure you, Mr. Commissioner, that Italy will lead the world." He took the case to Parliament that morning, and by afternoon, I was told that all of my requests had been granted. Such was the generosity and the urgency that was felt all over Europe.

By the time I flew back to Ethiopia, the airport was full of foreign planes, There was the RA, the German Air Force, Soviet planes, and many chartered planes shuttling relief items from Europe and the Middle East. It was incredible. I had left Ethiopia frustrated, disappointed, and weighed down by the feeling that the situation was hopeless.

Now I came back to find Addis Ababa overflowing with foreign reporters, TV crews, mechanics, and volunteers. By the end of November, there were more than 200 reporters from all over the

world. There were 1,351 mechanics, aircraft crew members, experts on water supply, and truck drivers. There were over 600 Western expatriates working in the field, 121 doctors, and many more visitors and temporary workers. Our country was suddenly the center of world attention. The day I returned I was summoned to the office of the Head of State. Mengistu was furious. He was upset by the film shown in Great Britain. He was annoyed that the West ridiculed his celebration and that no mention was made of his achievements. Ethiopia was portrayed as a famine country, a land of misery and poverty. He was angered by the presence of the RAF, the German Air Force, and all the unscheduled flights coming in without notice. Soviet assistance had not been properly publicized. Reporters were sniffing around. His personal concern for the people was not being properly reported.

In December, a group of 38 top British pop singers, led by Bob Geldof, an Irish rock singer, recorded a fund-raising song titled "**Do They Know It is Christmas?**" The project was known as "**Band-Aid.**" The funds raised were significant, but the most important contribution was the way in which the record kept momentum around the world. It sparked a series of similar events in Europe and North America. In 1985, Geldof raised over \$100 million through a day-long internationally televised appeal, "Live-Aid," which took place simultaneously in Great Britain and Philadelphia and brought together dozens of popular recording stars. (more in the book)

In Canada, churches worked around the clock to gather contributions. Relief groups went door to door, placed collection boxes on street corners, and pressured local governments to give. Canadian relief agencies produced all kinds of special items to raise money: hunger coins, - shirts, and caps. One Canadian fundraising slogan was: "Take an Absent Friend to Lunch Today." In Guelph, Ontario, Fred Benson handed over his 107-acre farm to a Mennonite relief agency to be auctioned off. \$250,000 of the money went to famine relief activities. Eskimos from Fort Smith village in the Northwest Territories organized a show with proceeds going to famine relief.

Concerts and dances were held by social clubs. Recording stars Ann Murray, Murray McLaughlin, and Neil Young combined their talents to put out a fundraising record, "Tears Are Not Enough." It was announced that Speaker of the Ontario Legislature Joan Turner would cancel the annual Speaker's Christmas Party and donate the \$10,000 saved to Ethiopian relief. The Canadian government, which along with Sweden and Australia has been a constant source of humanitarian assistance since 1974, quickly established an African Emergency Office headed by Dr. MacDonald with Secretary of State Joe Clark as coordinator. The government created a \$20 million special fund and promised a matching fund for every dollar donated.

In the United States, it was more of the same. Voluntary agencies received thousands of letters and telephone calls pledging money. Many individuals volunteered to help in fundraising. In Kansas City, there was a campaign called "Buy a Blanket." A property management firm in Aspen, Colorado, pledged one percent of its gross profit to famine relief. Congressman Phil Sharp wrote to one voluntary agency: "That part of my salary, which reflects an increase for 1983-84 will be contributed to charitable organizations." The prisoners of New York State's Mt. MacGregor Correctional Facility contributed. The homeless people of Los Angeles donated \$175 in nickels and pennies. One event that created great public awareness in the United States was

a fundraising campaign called "Children for Children." Most of the children were from welfare families in the poorest parts of New York City. Trying to raise enough money to send an airplane filled with grain to Ethiopia, they touched the hearts and minds of millions who watched their efforts on ABC's 20/20. Theirs was an extraordinary event that inspired others to do more. I went to Effeson, Northern Shoa, a few weeks after their grain had been distributed. The situation had improved steadily. The empty sacks were everywhere, now used for clothing and shelter, but the labels still said: "From the Children of New York." Soon after that, USA for Africa launched its campaign with the record "We are the World." Headed by Harry Belafonte. It was an extraordinary ensemble. (Read Book for details)

Soon after, United States Artist (USA for Africa), launched its campaign with the record "**We are the World**" led by Harry Belafonte, it brought it brought together " a galaxy of stars" in the United Sates on the January 1985. The single was released on March 8 followed by the album a month later. It was well publicized colorful fund-raiser that did much to increase world-wide awareness of the African famine. (More in the book)

Ordinary Human Beings

A woman sent a check along with this letter:

"I have been trying to quit smoking for a long time. When I saw your program, I realized how much I really spend on unnecessary things such as this. I have not bought a pack of cigarettes since. Every time I think about smoking, I think of that starving child who needs that money a lot worse than I need those cigarettes.

Someone with a drinking problem wrote expressing his desire to help a child:

Now it makes me feel good because I am helping someone with the money I used to drink with, and it is going to good use, and at the same time, I am helping myself, and now I have an extra person to care for, and I am proud to care for."

From Hull, Ontario:

"I am a cancer patient and am now on disability. Although my disease is dreadful, at least when required, I have good, clean medical care, not to mention daily nutrition. Somehow, it seemed my problem faded away when I saw those helpless people on the screen."

From Madoe, Ontario:

"I hesitated at sending this amount, (the contribution enclosed) which I know seems very small, but to me is quite a bit as I only have my pensions. I don't have things in my home like other people, not even plumbing, but I am thankful for what I have. I have always found that one never loses by giving.

At the donors' conference of December 1984, I read this letter from an 11-year-old Japanese boy who sent a check for 50 yen (about 18¢):

"I watched Life in Ethiopia on TV on Oct. 23 and I want to give one happiness to these people and I am sending herewith an allowance I got when I went to the country in the summer vacation. How much will they be able to buy with this money? Will they be able to consult a doctor? I really don't know; make a good use of the money. I intended to buy a record player, but I decided to send the money because the later I buy, the better the record player will be made ...but people's needs cannot be postponed... that is why I am sending you the money soon before I change my mind.'

Through our embassy in Washington, I received this letter from an eight-year-old girl addressed to Mengistu Haile Mariam.

“I am very worried about what is going to happen next. I feel that some of my family will die in Ethiopia and I won't get a chance to see them or meet them if they die. After seeing these people dying, many times I cry and often I can't sleep or study. They say Ethiopia is poor. Your country has beauty and wealth. It is the oldest religious country. Your country did not have slavery or slave trade. Why must Ethiopia suffer? Ethiopia has gold, coffee, and minerals. Here is \$2.00 which I have earned. If you would come to America to visit I will show you all through Iowa. Iowa is an Indian word that means beautiful land. God bless the hungry and the poor, for God is good and I love Him. My mother is American and my father Ethiopian. I pray that America and Ethiopia will be friends and love one another like my parents love each other: Tsehay Abebe.”

Just before I left Ethiopia for good I addressed the international community and in it I said this:

“Jointly, we have managed to save the lives of helpless children, the lives of the aged and able but needy. Through our combined efforts, the drought victims in Ethiopia have been saved from starvation and death. Yet more importantly, the world has learned an historic lesson—that where there is the will and the determination, humanity can be saved from any disaster of whatever magnitude and complexity. In the face of this victory, my words of gratitude have no place. Each and every nation, institution, organization and individual that has assisted in our relief and life-saving operations must have justifiable pride for what has been achieved. Compassion has prevailed over politics and the world has assisted the RRC in discharging its responsibilities towards the most unfortunate sections of Ethiopian society in an honorable and historic manner.”

The United Nations assistant Secretary general, Jurt Janson, (my counterpart) supervising the overall operation had this to say in his book: *The Ethiopian Famine*:

“Dawit remains the hero of the relief operation, Without him it would have been impossible to achieve the aim of saving millions of people from death by starvation.”

The President of World vision Reverend Tom Huston with whom I worked very closely particularly in opening a peace corridor in Tigray conflict areas had this to say in his report to the United Nations General Assembly:

“ There is little doubt in my mind that the key person in getting relief to as many people as were helped in the recent famine was Dawit. Our staff regard him highly both as a person and as an administrator who got things done and who really cared for those who were suffering.”

Eventually we got more than we can handle. ***“We can't help everyone. But everyone can help someone.”***

In the United Kingdom, Belgium and a few other European countries, this operation is being remembered this month as one of the most important events in recent world history. Remembering its fortieth anniversary I have been interviewed by floods of European historians and journalists and particularly the BBC. I thought I should share this unprecedented with

owners of this story, Ethiopians, through quotes from my book **RED TEARS**; beginning page 188. The book is 370 pages published in 1989; focusing on this historic phenomenon. Nothing has ever happened that resembles this magnificent show of global solidarity. I hope there will be more of such global compassion and overwhelming response. **For me this experience has strengthened my faith in humanity. That is why I call this operation: The Triumph of Humanity.**

Dawit W Giorgis
