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Crisis of climate, land use underlies Ethiopia's drought

by Chris Herlinger



Fr. Teum Berhe Danne says Tigray, Ethiopia, is where forests once thrived but where rain is now scarce. (Photos by Chris Herlinger)

ADIGRAT, ETHIOPIA -- It says a lot about Tigray, Ethiopia, that people can't legally cross the border with Eritrea but cattle can.

"It is a chain of disaster," Fr. Teum Berhe Danne mused one morning recently about life in this northern province that borders Eritrea -- a locale that almost seems to define the word *hardscrabble*.

It is a place where forests once thrived but where rain is now scarce. It rained only five days here from June to August, a third of the usual amount, and the land resembles the desert border areas between Mexico and Arizona.

Tigray is a complicated place. It bore the brunt of Ethiopia's two-year war with Eritrea more than a decade ago, felt some of the worst effects of the infamous 1984 drought and famine, and is the home region of many of the leaders of Ethiopia's current government.

War, migration and drought have long been thorns to those who have resided here, and the markings and detritus of conflict and insecurity are widely visible.

It is still a militarized area -- hence the difficulties in crossing the border -- and in the course of a few hours it is possible to see military checkpoints that dot the dry, mountainous area and the occasional Kalashnikov rifle swung casually over the shoulder of a civilian walking down a dusty road.

Also visible: the signs for the Italian War Cemetery in Adigrat, where more than 700 Italian soldiers who perished in the mid-1930s during Italy's invasion of Ethiopia are buried.

'Displacement has been the norm here,' Danne said, shaking his head, recalling migrations and disappearances that occurred during Eritrea's occupation of the province during the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict.

Beyene Bayru, 85, a farmer, laughed when asked how many times he has had to move because of conflict, war or drought -- the latter being the most recent cause of concern throughout the whole of the Horn of Africa. 'It's a lifetime of moving,' he said.



Another farmer, Gebrhiwest Meles, 66, recalls a number of droughts

throughout his lifetime, both during the reign of Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, and during the mid-1980s. While a severe drought in the 1970s is most often recalled by Ethiopians of a certain age, it was the 1984 drought and famine, which resulted in some 1 million deaths, that brought Ethiopia unwelcome international attention as the 'poster child' of famine.

That is an image about which Ethiopians, and the Ethiopian government in particular, remain extremely sensitive -- so much so that few Ethiopian humanitarian workers want to be quoted by name on the subject.

It is clearly evident that the Ethiopia of 2011 is not the Ethiopia of the 1970s or 1980s. Ethiopians have learned to deal with and live with acute emergencies, and have tried to avoid the media images of starving babies and rail-thin adults.

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The problems of the 2011 crisis, however, point to what may be a more subtle, insidious crisis: If famines rooted in war and political unrest were the challenge of the 1980s, the crisis of 2011, though also human-made, is rooted in climate change, population pressures, deforestation and poor land use.

The current situation causes one Addis Ababa-based humanitarian worker to muse, 'How do we solve this problem permanently? This is a concern shared by many, many Ethiopians, who want to renew our

country's name, our profile, our pride. How can we permanently have enough food??

Certainly there is progress, and humanitarians in the field point out that in comparison to the 1980s, authorities are doing their best to respond to drought, prevent famine and adapt to climate change by finding ways to mitigate the effects of such changes.

By nearly all accounts, the Ethiopian government's response to the current drought, while not perfect and hobbled by the problems and snafus that characterize humanitarian interventions in any country, has been relatively effective, at least in preventing famine, which is defined as the widespread scarcity of food that can have one or multiple causes, including drought or government policies.

Early warning systems have generally worked and have brought emergency food to areas that need it.

"We don't have famine in Ethiopia," said Lane Bunkers, Catholic Relief Services' country representative in Ethiopia. "But there are people who are in need of emergency food assistance -- whose food pantries are empty."

Ethiopia's response has to be seen in the context of larger regional issues.

The current drought that has gripped the Horn of Africa for much of 2011 has caused severe hardship in Ethiopia and neighboring Kenya -- though not famine, which has occurred in parts of politically unstable Somalia; in all there are about 13 million in the Horn of Africa who are in some way affected by the current crisis.

In a recent interview, Paul Weisenfeld, who heads the Bureau for Food Security for the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, the principal relief and development agency of the U.S. government, noted that in contrast to Somalia, which does not have a functioning government with control over the entirety of the country, Ethiopia and neighboring Kenya have been able to respond to the drought, and have been able to prevent the famine that has gripped parts of Somalia.

"In a famine situation, there is obviously some outside stimulant, like a drought or major disease, that has a negative effect on food security," he said. "But the question is how do a country's social and political systems respond to that stimulant? In Kenya and Ethiopia, the governments are able to step up and do something about it. Not so in Somalia."

While the crisis overall in the region has eased some in recent months both because of needed and welcome rains and because humanitarian interventions by both governments and humanitarian agencies have paid off, the problems besetting the Horn of Africa are far from over. The United Nations, for example, estimates that 4.5 million in Ethiopia will still need some type of emergency food assistance in the coming months.

In short, 2011 has not, as farmer Meles, says, "been good a year." And persistent problems will continue through at least 2012.

When there is little or no water, a lack of overall irrigation systems and an agricultural economy still dependent on rain, people in rural areas "can be easily affected by a shock," said Legesse Dadi, an agricultural specialist with Catholic Relief Services.

In some ways, Tigray is lucky at the moment. According to USAID, Tigray is an area that is "stressed" by the current drought -- a level below crisis, and three levels below catastrophic or famine.

And parts of the area have long experience with the hardships wrought by extremes of climate. "Even in the best of times, Irob has been a tough place," Jerry Jones, the Addis Ababa-based representative of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, said of the Irob region of Tigray.

Yet the land in Ethiopia is a delicate organism, and the cycles of rain or drought are closely linked -- drought in one area can easily overlap bounty in another. Western and central Ethiopia, for example, make up the country's coffee belt, and that area has been spared the worst effects of the drought.

People in affected areas talk of "green hunger" -- the paradox of some parts of Ethiopia producing coffee and not feeling any effects of the drought while those of other areas are struggling to feed themselves.

That some areas have been spared drought is small comfort. As Ethiopians like to point out, "You can't eat coffee."

That is particularly the case given the persistence of droughts -- which are occurring now in closer intervals of every few years rather than once a decade. Such frequency erodes resources -- the result being that "people don't have that much to save for the problematic days," said Dadi.

"If I lose my job, I can sell my house and support myself," Dadi said, speaking as an urban resident. But those in rural areas can't do that. "They don't have the resources. And if drought comes, it becomes that much harder to survive."

Particularly affected are women, many of whom face a harrowing cycle once their husbands leave their households to look for work outside of areas where food is scarce.

Women, left with children and trying to find ways to support themselves and their families, will move to larger towns and work as maids, vendors or, when most desperate, sex workers. Sometimes they will move from city to city, with some ending up in the capital of Addis Ababa, where, more often than not, they end up on the street.

"A woman becomes too weak to beg and if she's lucky, she will end up at a Missionaries of Charity home, where she dies quietly, leaving orphaned children," Dr. Dehab Belay, an HIV/AIDS specialist with CRS, said of an all-too-common scenario.

That is the reality of the urban street. But at the root of the country's problems are the realities and stress felt in Ethiopia's rural areas.

The one-hour flight from Addis to Tigray shows up one problem. From a plane, what is most striking is that it seems as if every bit of usable land in Ethiopia -- even the top of plateaus that jut deep gorges -- is in use.

In early November, golden barley was the crop being harvested, so that from the air, the land looked like a crowded checkerboard of asymmetrical yellow blocks, mixed in with brown and green areas.

During several days in Tigray, the evidence of stress was not hard to find.

Terhas Sibhatu, 38, who lives in the town of Anitena, says she and other residents are worried about the future -- about water wells drying up, about crops becoming harder to grow or to buy, with the increase in food prices.

The growing scarcity of water is now affecting day-to-day life, putting pressures on the amount people

drink and use for cleaning and cooking. As for food, Sibhatu is concerned that the growing scarcity of food threatens traditional cultural norms of communities sharing things to eat during times of trouble.

‘There is tension now, yes,’ she said of life within and between communities.

Abraha Haylu, a construction worker who has lived in the region all of his life, recalled an earlier time of springs and trees, of forest and shade -- now evolving into desert. ‘We have seen the change. This was once land covered by forest,’ he said as he worked on a dam project coordinated by the Adigrat Diocesan Catholic Secretariat, a local church-based relief, development and advocacy group headed by Danne.

The father of four adult children, Haylu said none of them live in the region -- in fact, two are now working in Saudi Arabia and one in Kenya. ‘Young people don’t want to work and stay here,’ he said, noting the lack of substantial economic opportunities.

In a region where the needs, Danne said, are ‘100 times greater than what we are able to respond to,’ that is one problem. Another is how to solve the problem of persistent drought in an area where the dry, rocky soil is being overused and overcultivated.

There are some signs of hope. One point of pride for the local church is a 38-meter-deep dam that took more than a decade to build, funded by both local and international donors, including Caritas Switzerland. The dam, helping supply water to an immediate area of some 35,000 people, has eased some of the water pressures in the region. Its sheer scale is impressive.

But are building dams and other efforts sustainable and practical in an area where insecurity is common and the effects of drought seem to be expanding, not contracting?

As he overlooked the dam and peered at a steep hillside in which every conceivable parcel of land is being used, Danne said that recent data have suggested that living on the land as it is now is sustainable -- but only if population numbers remain roughly the same or decrease.

He said people in the region are hoping that mining could offer some economic boost to the area. Still, most will continue to look to farming for their livelihoods.

‘Those who have said, ‘I can eat this much and educate my children,’ they will continue to stay,’ Danne said. For those who cannot find work and want to leave for schooling, they will in all likelihood leave. ‘There is nothing to attract them back. The land is so small, the productivity is so small,’ he said.

Danne looked again at the steep hillside across the valley. ‘Look at that. It’s 1-inch soil. Only a very few people can harvest such a tiny plot of land. No, the rest will immigrate.’

The cleric noted that erratic rains not only do not help the parched land but actually help destroy it because the soil is now so unaccustomed to moisture.

‘The right name for it is desert. Irob is now a desert,’ he said. ‘A rocky desert.’

Next issue: Kenya faces a crisis.

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. He was recently on assignment in Kenya and Ethiopia for *NCR*. His book *Rubble Nation: Haiti’s Pain, Haiti’s Promise* was just published by Seabury Books.]

Facts on the horn of Africa drought

- The United Nations says there are 13.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance in the Horn of Africa, with some 1.5 million internally displaced persons in Somalia.
- The Horn of Africa broadly encompasses Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Kenya. Somalia is the worst-hit country in the region, with 4 million of the country's estimated 7.5 million people facing crisis.
- The current drought is reportedly the worst in more than 60 years. Concern about the impact of drought in the Horn of Africa escalated in June, when the Famine Early Warning Systems Network reported this year was the driest in the region since 1950.
- A lack of rain during two key rainy seasons, October to December 2010 and April to June 2011, has resulted in the worst annual crop production in 17 years. Other fallouts: reduction of labor demand, below average livestock prices and excessive livestock mortality.
- The impact of the drought has further been exacerbated by high food and fuel prices, and the continuing absence of a functional government in Somalia.

-- *Source: Columbia University School of Public and International Affairs*

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