

Famine in Eritrea: Real or Imagined?

By Kibreab Tesfai

In the past few days, we have been inundated by a spate of news reports of a presumed “famine that is gripping Eritrea”. The sirens of doom and gloom are wailing loud again.

To illustrate: the August 5 Edition of ***Africa Confidential*** reads: “...The Horn of Africa’s worst drought in six decades has prompted the United Nations to take the rare step of declaring famine in two regions of Somalia...The gravity of the crisis has been known for a year, with no effective international reaction. It could prompt political turmoil mainly in **Somalia and Eritrea** but also in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya... About a quarter of Somalia’s ten million people have fled from areas controlled by Al Shabab... Eritrean President, Issayas Afwerki... denies people in his country face famine and refuses to deal with aid agencies”. Similar stories appeared in various news agencies and daily papers, including the *Japan Times*. To cap it all, US Representative to the UN, Susan Rice, told ***Inner City Press*** on August 10 “...We believe there is famine in Eritrea, but we are deeply concerned that none of us know because they have barred UN agencies, barred NGOs. ... And the people of Eritrea, who must... most likely are suffering the very same food shortages ...are being left to starve because there is not access, there is a clear cut denial of access by the government of Eritrea of food and other humanitarian support for its people”.

What are the true facts? Is there an iota of truth in these wild accusations? Is Eritrea really seething under the pernicious threat of famine while its “callous” government “covers up the facts” as its detractors allege? Are the reports based on field visits or credible assessment by competent bodies? And who are the forces now singing to the same chorus, anyway? Do they really care about the well-being of the Eritrean people? Or is this part and parcel of the ongoing, insidious, hate and demonization campaign against Eritrea and its President doggedly pursued by Eritrea’s enemies to advance ulterior political motives that have nothing to do with philanthropic or developmental agendas and objectives?

The Horn of Africa region remains, sadly, prone to cyclical droughts which at times have bordered on calamitous famines of biblical proportions (the harrowing

famine that claimed more than 200,000 lives in Ethiopia in 1974; less severe droughts that afflicted the region in 1980s etc). Adverse climatic conditions that produce these perennial droughts almost in every decade; erratic rains which come, when they do, in torrential patterns out of sync with the harvest timeline of traditional farmers; archaic agricultural methods; obsolete land tenure systems; poor or non-existent water harvesting infrastructure; and, the paucity or absence of large-scale modern irrigation schemes remain key factors that continue to dampen agricultural productivity and national output below optimal levels even during good years of bumper harvest. These systemic problems are further compounded by intra-State and inter-State conflicts - of which the Horn has had more than its fair share in the last fifty years - as development agendas are hampered and vital resources diverted to shore up national security needs.

But intractable as they may seem, the recurrent bouts of drought and crop shortfall that stalk the Horn countries cannot not, and should not, elude effective remedies or enduring solutions for long. A much graver problem would be a mindset that perceives these challenges as a perpetual regional bane that can only be cushioned and mitigated by international humanitarian assistance. And in this respect, the policies and track record of the Government of Eritrea have been focused, purposeful, and visionary in as far as the marshalling of vital resources for accelerating the desired long-term solution is concerned, and, realistic and pragmatic in tackling prevalent harvest shortfalls in the short-term by tapping all available and appropriate instruments (local subsidies, soliciting food assistance when needed etc.).

This is illustrated by the following facts:

- For the last decade, and especially since 2005, the GOE has put food security, both at the national and household levels, as its highest priority in its developmental drive. To this end, the Ministry of Agriculture has been vigorously pursuing rolling three-year programmes of agricultural modernity whose critical components include the erection of efficient water management and harvesting structures, the expansion of soil preservation and enrichment techniques, the establishment and enlargement of modern irrigation farms as well as research on high yield seeds. Government budgetary allocations to these programmes have not only been substantial but the GOE has also sought support from its international development partners. (Among other things, the EU's

support to this programme, though still at the project formulation stage, amounts to 70 million Euros).

- Especially in the last decade, the Ministry of Agriculture has introduced extensive income supplementing programmes for rural communities that include: credit facilities for agricultural activities, the distribution of baby chicks for backyard poultry development, the provision of bee-hives etc.
- During the lean years of relatively low annual agricultural output, the Government has purchased the necessary food items from the international market and sold them at subsidized prices to the population at large through designated outlets. At very critical times of total harvest failure (in 2002 for instance), the Government has solicited international assistance to supplement its efforts and to shore up the coping mechanisms of the affected communities. The GOE is not, of course, inclined to seek, bowl in hand, food assistance every time there is a harvest deficit if the latter is manageable through its own resources and devices. (Ethiopia routinely seeks food assistance for localized drought even when it produces huge food surpluses at the national level because it stands to earn hard currency for transport and local purchase by donors from the surplus regions).
- Eritrea had even sought, in the initial years after its independence, to strengthen IGAD as a vehicle of regional cooperation in mitigating drought through leveraging regional resources, prepositioning grain stocks etc, though these were hampered later due to externalities.

The current food situation in Eritrea

I have digressed from the main issue of the “presumed famine” in Eritrea in the belief that a broader perspective of the circumstances that underpin drought and some discussion of GOE policies and practices are vital for an informed discourse on the topic at hand. Let me now revert to the actual facts.

As the tables below illustrate, the harvest last year was good because the long rains (June-September 2010) were exceptionally good. Annual precipitation varied from a low of 145mm to a high of 750mm. This exceeded the average levels by 30% and 20% respectively. But the difference was not only in the aggregate volume of rainfall. Most critically, the frequency of the rains was at its optimum in the sense of continuous showers, without lengthy interruptions or

intervals in July and August. The geographical distribution of the rains, another critical parameter for adequate food security at the household level, was also at its optimum since all the regions received good rainfall at the right season. Consequently, there were no areas of localized drought or crop shortfall. In addition, all the dams and wells were replenished increasing horticultural national produce and boosting the animal stock.

Table I - Area and Production of Crops 2001-2010*

Year	Area (Ha)	Production (ton)
2001	386,696	237,990
2002	393,267	64,290
2003	468,093	115,330
2004	421,969	89,254
2005	521,889	379,865
2006	539,969	431,549
2007	540,380	489,270
2008	437,155	109,078
2009	481,084	244,160
2010	482,844	420,654

**Source: Ministry of Agriculture*

Table II- Area and production of Fruits and vegetables 2001-2010*

Year	Vegetables		Fruits		Total	
	Area (Ha.)	Production (Ton)	Area (Ha.)	Production (Ton)	Area (Ha.)	Production (Ton)
2001	11,880	128,697	3,555	27,632	15,435	156,329
2002	12,411	117,867	4,016	55,590	16,427	173,457
2003	9,920	136,003	6,155	82,345	16,075	218,348
2004	12,614	133,789	4,908	108,581	17,522	243,370
2005	20,697	241,969	3,248	66,462,	23,945	308,431
2006	15,739	199.911	4,009	112,792	19,748	312,703
2007	18,349	184,872	4,213	91,232	22,562	276,104
2008	22,042	258,892	4,110	94,207	26,152	380,099
2009	17,101	208,880	3,997	98,492	21,098	307,372
2010	18,512	227,557	4,501	133,544	23,013	361,101

**Source: Ministry of Agriculture*

The tables above on annual crop, vegetable and fruit production demonstrate that the aggregate agricultural output in 2010, amounting to over 860,000 metric tons, was the highest in the last decade. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, production at the household level was at its highest due to non-skewed or more even geographic distribution of the rains with almost optimal frequency over the rainy season.

These are the hard, indelible, facts. Hard facts that have never been contested by the several UN agencies that operate in the country (UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, WHO etc.). True, UN agencies are required to seek permits to travel to certain parts of the country. But that is not tantamount to a blanket travel ban. These agencies indeed routinely monitor whatever projects they have throughout the country. Moreover, a cursory comparison of prices of staple grains – sorghum, maize, wheat, teff etc. – in Asmara and other urban areas for the same months of 2009 and 2010 corroborate the difference in harvests as 2010 prices were invariably lower by almost 100% for all these grains despite seasonal fluctuations.

All these non-sense about a “hidden famine” in Eritrea is thus utterly false. More importantly, it is patently clear that those who are peddling these lies harbor malicious intentions against Eritrea. The cynicism is particularly repugnant as some of those shedding crocodile tears on the “silent suffering of the Eritrean population” are currently engaged in slamming punitive economic sanctions against Eritrea and have all along been feverishly working to obstruct investment and meaningful economic progress of the country. In reality, these forces are not interested in preventing or mitigating famine in Eritrea. On the contrary, that is what they crave to see to find additional excuses, like “humanitarian intervention”, to promote their sinister objectives. If, among the flock, there are some gullible journalists who have fallen into the trap, again, there is no excuse for their sloppy journalism and irresponsibility. We are sick and tired of the endless game of impugning and indicting Eritrea for non-existent facts and events.