

The people of Ethiopia are living through a nightmare. Most parts of the unfortunate country haven't received any rain for the last three years. The prolonged drought has led to a severe shortage of food. After the repeated failure of crops, people depended on their livestock for a time to get milk and meat but now most of the animals are gone – either consumed by their owners or starved to death. One of the world's poorest nations, Ethiopia is at present threatened by a large-scale famine. The southern region of this vast country is worst hit by the shortage of food where over eight million human beings are faced with starvation.

So far hundreds of people have died of hunger here. Many have been attacked by disease as a result of malnutrition. The south of Ethiopia is mostly inhabited by nomadic tribes which are wandering around in search of food and water. The suffering and agony of these people can be imagined by anyone. The TV news channels are showing film reports from Ethiopia containing disturbing images of babies dying of hunger in the arms of their mothers. Starvation has reduced these small children to living skeletons. Their bony faces make them look like old men. It is painful to watch the starved babies even on the TV screen. It must be unbearable for a helpless mother to see her kid dying of starvation.

Against the unfolding tragedy of famine in Ethiopia, the international community has so far failed to respond adequately and quickly. It is shocking to observe that the UN, the United States and her allies so far seem indifferent to the human suffering in this part of the world. Their inaction is made criminal by the fact that the country's government raised a noise about the drought and appealed for international aid months ago. But in this global village nobody listened to Ethiopia's cries for help.

And now that famine has become a reality, the West is still silent. In fact, when Addis Ababa reminded the world of its earlier appeals for aid, the EU High commissioner for Human Affairs

Ethiopia's famine

The gap between the rich and the poor – nations as well as individuals – is the most serious problem faced by humanity today, says NADEEM SHAHID

accused the Ethiopian government of unnecessarily politicising the crisis.

So far, the only international movement towards helping the victims of famine has been a visit to Ethiopia by the head of the UN World Food Programme. Catherine Bertini arrived in the country on April 12 to see the plight of the starving people herself and work out a plan to provide relief.

Human suffering in Ethiopia is not something new to Africa. This continent has been plagued, more than anyone else, with the worst problems. Many countries in Asia, Central and South America, and even Europe have poverty, ignorance, civil wars or face frequent natural calamities. But nowhere on the earth, suffering is so severe and so wide-spread as in Africa. Name any human problem and this region of the world would supply you with painful examples from the recent past. Famine almost always exists in one part of the continent or the other. Ethiopia itself experienced a horrible shortage of food back in the '80s. Civil war is another permanent feature of the African scene. If Somalia and Angola are still suffering the consequences of their past internal conflicts, Sudan and the Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) are going through their respective civil-wars at present.

Poverty, the mother of all evils, is



Famine in Ethiopia

mainly responsible for Africa's problems. It is not only one of the worst forms of human suffering, it also leads, directly or indirectly, to other problems such as famine or civil-war. It is also poverty which makes natural disasters extremely destructive in the region. Floods could never be so devastating in a richer country as they proved to be in Mozambique and Madagascar this February. Even the brutal killings of over

1000 people by the members of a Christian doomsday cult in Uganda early this year can be partly blamed on poverty and ignorance. These two factors pushed the victims to find solace in the strange beliefs of the movement for the restoration of Ten Commandments. The leaders of this cult finally persuaded their followers to commit suicide. However, many people think most of the victims were actually murdered by their spiritual teachers.

What is so depressing about the poverty and misery in Africa is the fact that certain other parts of the planet are so rich and prosperous. Contrast the living conditions in the African countries and the developed or rich parts of the world and you will feel there is no justice or equality among human beings. While the majority of people in the West and the oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia or Brunei live in luxury, over one billion human beings live in absolute poverty elsewhere.

The distribution of world's wealth and resources is extremely unjust among nations and regions. The West may keep portraying the planet as a global village, but in fact there exist two worlds – one, prosperous and happy, the other, poor and miserable. The distribution of wealth among individuals is equally unjust. While millions of people in the world find it hard to get their daily bread, the likes of Bill

Gates and the Sultan of Brunei own staggering fortunes. The latter keeps 350 Rolls-Royces in his palace-size garage and his brother Prince Jefri has done shopping worth \$2.75 billion over the last 10 years.

The gap between the rich and the poor – nations as well as individuals – is the most serious problem faced by humanity. The world powers need to take it seriously. In recent years, there has been a movement towards finding solutions for the evil of large-scale poverty in the developing countries. The United States, Britain, and France promised late last year to write off billions of dollars owed to them by the poorest nations. This pledge provides a ray of hope to several African states. The rich countries of the planet have been giving generous aid to nations hit by calamities like famine or earthquakes in the past. But they should try to help the poor countries in a way which enables them to rise out of their poverty. Charity is only a short-term answer to poverty. The world desperately needs a just new world order. That's more or less what the leaders of developing world have demanded at the G-77 Summit in Havana this week.

At the close, it should be mentioned that the Africans themselves are also partly responsible for their plight. The problems of African nations were either created or exacerbated by bad rulers. Corrupt and incompetent leaders such as Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko and Nigeria's Sani Abacha were largely responsible for the common man's suffering in their respective countries. And the masses themselves are not free from blame. They supported or tolerated bad governments.

One such government is in power in Ethiopia right now. It has accused the international community of ignoring its warning about the imminent famine. But its own behaviour is more criminal than that of the outside world. Just months ago, the Ethiopian rulers went to war with the neighbouring Eritrea, wasting the country's scarce funds on a futile conflict while the masses were bracing themselves for the coming famine.

The Nation
18/4/00
Afghanistan