

CYNICAL FOOD SALE: DEFENDING THE INDEFENSIBLE

By E. Selome

Your 13 february issue printed an article by the Norwegian Consul and representative of the Norwegian Church Aid in Ethiopia which criticized Aftenposten editorial of January 18 entitled "Cynical food sale." The subject of the editorial was the sale of meat by hungry Ethiopia to Egypt at a time when thousands are dying for lack of food. In his letter Mr. Olafsson explicitly defended not only the sale of meat but much of the policies and activities of the Ethiopian authorities. Since his arguments are full of contradiction and his accounts contrary to the universal truth it really does not deserve a reaction. Nevertheless, in case there are some readers confused by his accounts, I take this opportunity to challenge his arguments point by point.

The reasons, the missionary-turned aid worker-turned a diplomat, innumerate in defense of the Ethiopian governments sale of meat to Egypt could confuse the readers who have never been in that country. But for some one who know the country and the people the accounts in his article, is, to say the last of it, deplorable.

1. The author claims that meat slaughtered should be eaten the same day since storing meat in refrigerators is expensive or inaccessible. Rubbish. Meat, being the most favorite food of the Ethiopians, they know how to eat and store it without the use of refrigerators. The day a cattle is slaughtered part of it is eaten raw and another part (enough for 1-2 day consumption) is cooked. The rest they cut it in long thin pieces, dry it, grind it, and store it in cans. In this form, the meat relieved from its water content, is richer in protein and can be stored for years at all temperatures. This form of the meat is locally known as Quanta.

2. He claims that if the cattle are to be slaughtered at the camps there should be grazing which does not exist. My question is where is the origin of the cattle? Certainly the cattle have not suddenly appeared out of the blue skies. Nor did they come out from a factory production line. They can only come from the peasants in the countryside. Both from famine stricken and other areas outside the towns. What were these cattle eating during their time of life in Ethiopia? Certainly not protein rich biscuits. How about the urban population, the majority of whom, have not eaten their favorite food for years because of the price tagged on them?

3. The author further claims that traditional cooking with wood fire takes long time where this energy is scarce. Drought has substantially affected harvest of crops but wood, plant leaves, dried grass were even visible to us here when we were shown films of the camps and their surroundings. Even if there is scarcity it would be naive to present an argument that because of lack of cooking staff meat has to be sold. After all whose responsibility is that energy supply is lacking? The problem could easily be solved if the government that he defends divert money from buying bombs and whiskies (staff bought to cook human beings) to buy energy supply. This would have been a positive diversion (instead of the vice-versa) which can be appreciated by all

sensible people. The money the Ethiopian government lavishly spends on armaments is the right money that should have gone to energy supply. Besides, as I have earlier mentioned raw meat is the preference of the Ethiopian.

Here, too, one has to be very skeptical about the so-called industrial equipments which is to be bought by the sale of meat. All military equipments shipped to the Ethiopian ports sarcastically carry the mark "Industrial Goods".

The most serious criticism to be leveled at Mr. Olafsson's article concerns his criticism of Aftenposten in particular and the western media in general for characterizing the regime in Addis Ababa as "inhuman" and "without feeling to the agony of its people." Although the inhumanity of the Derg, as seen during its 10 years in power, can be told in big volumes, let me bring forth one case which the Norwegian Church Relief representative prefers to lightly call it a wrong priority. During the calendar year 1984 the Derg was fully occupied in the preparation for its 10 years anniversary. For the Ethiopian to talk about the famine during this long period was punishable. Foreign reporters, among them NRK, were barred from visiting the countryside. But the drought was taking its toll at the same level it was taking in October. During this long period countless people have vanished without being filmed by European TV cameramen. Is this inhumanity or wrong-priority? For a former missionary and representative of the Norwegian Church Aid and a practicing diplomat, it is simply the later.

The description of the situation in Tigray and Eritrea, as told by Mr. Olafsson, also lacks basic credence. He can see the effects without having the faintest notion of the causes. After staying in the country for so long, he should have grasped the fact that the people in Eritrea, Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia are not fighting in order to get food from outside. They are not fighting as actors of a Hollywood film production either. They are people who are denied basic human and political rights. And who are those guerrilla fighters? May be some one from a far away place has to tell him that they are the sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, cousins and nephews, uncles and aunts of the hungry people. The author of the article does at least recognize the fact that those at war are liberation fronts. But liberation from whom? Is it not the liberation from the economic, political and human suppression of the Derg?

Furthermore Mr. Olafsson maintains that the liberation fronts have made it difficult for the RRC (the state's relief organization) and foreign aid - groups to operate. The RRC, being a wing of the government, can not provide the people in the north food at the same time when the army is bombing them. Regarding the operation of the foreign aid groups, a cease-fire was officially proposed by the fronts and supported by many governments, U.N. bodies, the Red-Cross, and other major and minor relief organizations. The truth is the Derg, for whose support he writes from 5000 miles away, said officially No. Here, too, one can clearly see a contradiction in his statements separated only by few lines. On one hand he accuses the liberation fronts for hindering the distribution by the RRC. On the other hand he claims substantial amount of food is distributed in Eritrea and Tigray by the RRC. If that was true why do we see thousands of people leaving their villages and streaming to the Sudan under horrible conditions? If RRC was distributing food in Eritrea and Tigray why do relief organizations, among them, Norwegian Church relief dare to send

food through the Sudan? Besides, it is ridiculous to claim that RRC can distribute in areas not controlled by the army. The author's account is a testimony that his vision suffers from the limitation of a single perspective - the Derg bias.

Mr. Olafsson also deals concisely about the food sent by Australia to the famine stricken people of Eritrea and Tigray which is seized by the Ethiopian authorities. He maintains that it would have been cheaper, easier and shorter to send it via the Derg rather than the Sudan. The author conveniently disregard the hard realities in the region and sees the case purely from geographical point of view. I would not think the donors are that bad in geography although they were bad in the arrangement of the shipment.

After all his deplorable defense of the Derg, the council tries to be diplomatic by writing "I am not in the defense of the communist government, they can defend themselves. "This can only be considered an insult to people's intelligence. The fact is that he is not only defending the regime but he is in perfect tune with it. One can not stop wondering what his motives could be. at this moment when the peoples of the western world, shocked by the agony of the Ethiopians and Eritreans, and indignant of the leadership in Addis Ababa, are united to save lives against all the odds. Mr. Olafsson seems to be a unique exception. It would be a mistake of great dimension if one tries to make a career out of this human tragedy.

Finally it is to be hoped that this naive representative will be able to grasp the vital dimension to his knowledge of the country - the human dimension of a fighting and suffering people determined to win the right to live as a free nation. At this juncture, it is my belief that this grave misrepresentation primarily concerns the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Development Aid, and the Norwegian Church Aid who have the responsibility to protect the humanitarian image and neutral position which is at stake.

(Printed in Aftenposten after obtaining approval by the editor to use my daughters name as the author of the article.)