

## 1984 Great Ethiopian Famine: TPLF Still Licensed to Steal

### Remembering the Great Ethiopia Famine of 1984 (Part II)

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In my commentary last week, ([Remembering the Great Ethiopia Famine of 1984, Part I](#)), I reviewed various commentaries I had written over the years challenging the fabricated and false claims of the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and its late leader Meles Zenawi that there has been no famine in Ethiopia since they took power in 1991. I argued that Meles & Co., in a silent conspiracy of semantics and word games with the international donors and loaners, have managed to successfully conceal the existence of famine ravaging various parts of Ethiopia for over two decades. I concluded that famine in Ethiopia sugarcoated with fancy words and phrases is still famine!



Gebremedhin Araya (L), Max Perbody (C), Tekleweyne Assefa (R)

In Part II of my memorial to the victims of the 1984 famine, I revisit the great TPLF swindle of humanitarian aid during the 1984-86 famine. I first wrote on the TPLF theft of humanitarian aid during this period in my May 2011 Huffington Post commentary entitled, “[Licensed to Steal](#)”. Using interview evidence from two former top TPLF leaders, I examined the scope and magnitude of the of the criminal diversion of humanitarian aid by the TPLF for weapons purchases and other non-humanitarian purposes. The pattern and

practice of international aid corruption by the TPLF which began in 1984 still persists in 2014 with today with finesse and sophistication.

### **“Ali Baba” Meles and the 40 TPLF/REST Aid Thieves in 1984-85**

In 1984-85, at the height of the catastrophic famine in Northern Ethiopia, nearly a quarter of a billion dollars were raised internationally for famine relief. That famine was extreme and unprecedented in its severity. Michael Buerek of the BBC who visited the Tigrai region in 1984 described the situation as [“a biblical famine in the 20th Century”](#) and [“the closest thing to hell on Earth”](#).

In 1984-85, normal delivery of emergency humanitarian aid to the Tigrai region and other famine-stricken areas in Northern Ethiopia was virtually impossible because of rebel activity and bombardment by the Derg military junta. The roads normally used to deliver aid supplies to the Tigrai region from the capital had become unusable because of intense rebel military activity. The various international famine relief non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had to find alternate routes to quickly deliver relief aid to famine victims in rebel-controlled areas.

As an alternative, many of the NGOs set up shop in Eastern Sudan close to the Tigrai border to expedite food delivery to famine victims. The large concentration of NGOs on the Sudanese border and the publicity surrounding the enormous fundraising efforts by various international celebrities for Ethiopian famine victims caught the attention of the TPLF leaders who saw a lucrative business opportunity for themselves and their rebel army. They proffered themselves to the NGOs as effective conduits for relief aid delivery in the areas they controlled.

According to Gebremedhin Araya, a former treasurer and TPLF co-founder Dr. Aregawi Berhe, top TPLF leaders including the late Meles Zenawi, implemented an elaborate scam to swindle millions of dollars from international famine relief organizations earmarked for famine relief. Gebremedhin and Aregawi stated Meles and his top cadres hatched out and successfully executed a fraudulent scheme to use a front “humanitarian relief” organization called “Relief Society of Tigrai” (REST) for aid delivery. The TPLF leaders managed to

“convince” the various NGOs operating out of the Sudan that REST is a genuine charity organization completely separate from the TPLF, the military wing. In fact, REST was the other face of the TPLF coin.

[Dr. Aregawi Berhe, presently in exile, explained the TPLF’s sophisticated aid fleecing scam to BBC’s Martin Plaut:](#)

... Sometimes we were using aid money to buy arms through secondary means. You come to the Middle East, you can buy arms if you have the money. So we were using some of the money to buy arms. You know this organization called REST, Relief Society of Tigrai. It was the humanitarian wing of the TPLF, and through REST aid money was coming to the TPLF. So when you get this aid money, you make a budget for relief, for the Front or to buy arms, medicine and so on. I would say we were relying on the aid money for sustaining the struggle.

We are talking about millions of dollars. I can cite you a concrete example. In 1985, when Tigrai was hit by a terrible famine, aid money was flowing through REST to the TPLF. So the MLLT (Marxist-Lennist League of Tigrai), and the TPLF leadership which is almost one and the same had to budget for \$100 million U.S. dollars. *I remember Meles Zenawi suggesting that 50 percent of that money should go to TPLF activities; 45 percent should go to MLLT organizing and 5 percent to support the victims...* I know these two guys [Araya Gebremedhin and Tekleweyne Assefa]. They are TPLF fighters. One is pretending to be a merchant the other is pretending to be buying the sorghum from the merchant. Both of them are TPLF senior cadres and they are just doing a drama, pretending to be a merchant. All these things are dramas to get the money. [NGO representative Perbedy pictured above fanning a wad of cash] was fooled.”

Gebremedhin corroborated Aregawi’s statements. Gebremedhin (pictured above counting cash) said he personally handed cash payments in the hundreds of thousands of dollars to the late Meles Zenawi and the serpentine Godfather of the TPLF, Sebhat Nega. Meles and Nega, the two TPLF head honchos, controlled the cash flow of the TPLF. Although Gebremedhin was the chief TPLF

treasurer, he said he was kept in the dark about the uses of the money obtained from the NGOs after he delivered it to Meles or Nega. Gebremedhin nevertheless had well founded suspicions about the uses and misuses of the money. However, the incriminatory evidence, (including the candid photograph above depicting the two TPLF cadres and Max Perbody, a representative of Christian Aid, one of the largest UK NGO, counting and recording stashes of cash in a large satchel on the floor), is shocking as it is damning and irrefutable.

To magnify the severity and dramatize the gravity of the famine situation for the NGOs, the TPLF leaders ordered the exodus of large numbers of victims from Tigray into the Sudan creating a mushroom of refugee settlements overnight along the northern Sudanese-Ethiopian border. Using different techniques and methods, the TPLF leaders stage-managed an elaborate marketing “drama” for the NGOs to deliver aid to the large famine-stricken population inside Tigray. This was done principally by organizing a small group of their most trusted and inner circle members to pose as “grain merchants” and solicit business from the NGOs.

The NGO deception games, or more accurately the Western NGO *famine aid-sharking scheme*, were varied. At the onset of the scam, the TPLF leaders used a three-staged process. In stage one, one group of TPLF/REST officials masquerading as legitimate grain merchants would approach the myriad NGOs and offer to sell them substantial quantities of grain for quick delivery to the famine victims. At the time, the TPLF had acquired hundreds of heavy trucks and stashed in secret underground warehouses grains from various sources, including NGOs, for use by its fighters. These secretly stashed grain stockpiles were in fact being offered for sale to the NGOs. The TPLF/REST “grain dealers” would make grain sales deals with the NGOs, complete the sale transaction and return back to their hideouts with the cash payment. Gebremedhin personally played a direct role in this drama as a “grain dealer”. He described his role with stunning simplicity:

I was given clothes to make me look like a Muslim merchant. The NGOs don't know me because my name was Mohammed. It was a trick assigned (created) by the top leaders for the NGOs. I received a

great amount of money from the NGOs and the money was automatically taken by (the TPLF) leaders. The money, much of it, the leaders put it in their accounts in Western Europe. Some of it was used to buy weapons. The people did not get half a kilogram of maize. Once the grain “purchase” was made another group of TPLF/REST operatives would take over the responsibility of “delivering” the relief aid inside Tigray.

In the second stage, TPLF/REST officials would facilitate spot checks of grain stockpiles in their own secret warehouses. But the warehouses were tricked out. Gebremedhin said, “if you go there, half of the warehouse was stacked full of sacks of sand.” Gebremedhin said the NGO representatives would perform cursory visual inspections of the stockpiles in the warehouses, give their approval, make payments and cross back into the Sudan to make arrangements for additional grain purchases.

In the third stage, the same or different group of TPLF/REST operatives would go back to the NGOs and make a pitch for additional sales of grain for delivery in a different part of Tigray. These offers did not actually involve any new or fresh supplies of grain. Instead, stockpiles of grain already in secret storage facilities in various locations throughout Tigray were trucked around and shuttled to new locations, giving the appearance to the NGOs that fresh supplies of grain were being bought in for delivery. Since the aid workers had no means of independently verifying the grain that they are paying for is grain that is being shuttled from one location to another from TPLF stockpiles of fresh shipments, they would perform their usual cursory inspections and make payments. *In that manner, TPLF/REST were able to sell and resell multiple times the same previously acquired stockpile of grain (and sand) to the NGOs generating millions of dollars in revenue.*

[Martin Plaut, who as a BBC reported from the famine regions of northern Ethiopia in the 1970s’, in his March 2010 report](#) identified a 1985 official CIA document which concluded, “Some funds that insurgent organizations are raising for relief operations, as a result of increased world publicity, are almost certainly being diverted for military purposes.” [Robert Houdek, a senior US diplomat in Ethiopia](#)

[in the late 1980s](#), was quoted by the BBC saying that TPLF members at the time told him that some aid money was used to buy weapons. An aid worker named [Max Peberdy stated that he had personally delivered to TPLF/REST officials \\$500,000 in Ethiopian currency to purchase grain](#).

The *prima facie* [evidence of massive relief aid diversion and theft in 1984-85 by the TPLF is compelling and damning as Gebremedhin has detailed it in his articles](#). (To access Part I of Gebremedhin's Amharic article, [click here](#); for Part II, [click here](#).)

The evidence of TPLF aid theft and conversion is further corroborated by Prof. Seid Hassan in his meticulously researched and documented article, "[The State Capture Onset in Ethiopia: Humanitarian Aid and Corruption](#)" (*recommended reading*). Prof. Hassan concluded, "The documents I examined and the interviews and testimonials I gathered indicate that donors and aid agencies knew that the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) was the flip-side of the same coin- the TPLF and aid agency personnel knew a portion of the humanitarian aid that they were providing was being diverted for military purposes by the Fronts..."

Those accused of involvement in the wrongdoing have dismissed the evidence as "rubbish"; they have not called for a full fact-finding inquiry to clear their names of such serious and grave charges. Until such inquiry takes place, the evidence of aid-sharking and theft stands unchallenged and unrefuted. [Bob Geldof who organized Live Aid/Band Aid in 1984 collecting tens of millions of dollars in donations upon hearing of the claims of misuse of famine aid for arms purchases threatened](#), "If there is any money missing I will sue the Ethiopian government."

One must grudgingly admire these TPLF con men for their sheer audacity, genius and creativity in ripping off tens of millions of dollars earmarked for famine relief from the NGOs in the mid-1980s (and also for the past twenty-three years from the Ethiopian people). Truth be told, Ali Baba and his 40 thieves could not have pulled off such a brilliant scheme to sell and re-sell to the NGOs the same sand as grain over and over again. Even Hermes, the Greek god of thieves, would

not have been able to come up with such an exquisitely perfect plan to hoodwink and bamboozle gullible NGOs of hundreds of millions of dollars. The TPLF leaders truly deserves the title, “A New Breed of African Thieves”.

### **REST (Relief Society of Tigray) never rests**

U.S. food assistance in Ethiopia is administered Ethiopia *exclusively* through three foreign NGOs (Food for the Hungry (FH) (self-described as a “Christian organization serving the poor globally since 1971”), Save the Children (SC) (self-described as “the world’s top independent charity for children in need”), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) (the “official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States”) *and one domestic NGO, Relief Society of Tigray (REST). The very same REST that facilitated the swindling of hundreds of millions of aid dollars in 1984-86 is facilitating food aid delivery in Ethiopia in 2014.*

Between 2010 and 2014 (and quite possibly prior to 2010 as well), REST was the ONLY domestic NGO involved in the distribution of over USD\$1.5 billion in food aid. [According to an August 15, 2014 USAID report](#), USAID through its Office of Food for Peace provided REST and other international NGOs USD\$237 million in 2014; USD\$236 million in 2013; USD\$307 million in 2012; USD\$313 million in 2011 and USD452 million in 2010.

REST still describes itself as the “humanitarian wing of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front”. REST in 2014 is in fact a behemoth domestic NGO monopoly and a conduit for the diversion and laundering of international aid funds to the TPLF just as it was in 1984. It has no domestic competition in the distribution of international food aid in Ethiopia. As a matter fact, the so-called “Proclamation on Charities and Society” which decimated virtually all NGOs in Ethiopia (in 2010 after enactment of that law the number of civil society organizations in Ethiopia was reduced from about 4600 to about 1400 in a period of three months) made REST the undisputed domestic NGO monopoly. [According to one Ethiopian scholar](#), REST is a TPLF conduit. “The initial capital for TPLF’s business empire apparently came from several sources. A major conduit was the Relief

Society of Tigray (REST), a famine-relief charity run by the Front. *REST is widely credited for serving as an effective front organization for funneling aid money and materials from unsuspecting as well as willful foreign benefactors into TPLF coffers.*”

The fact of the matter is that under the so-called Charities law, the only domestic NGOs allowed to operate in the country are those that are wholly owned subsidiaries of the TPLF or others who have established partnerships with individuals and organizations affiliated with the TPLF. *In 1984, the TPLF laundered international humanitarian aid through REST. In 2014, the TPLF still launders international humanitarian aid through REST. How ironic! The more things change, the more they remain the same!*

[In all of Africa, USAID has its largest aid program in Ethiopia.](#) What has happened to the tens of billions of dollars in U.S aid given to the TPLF over the past 23 years? The answer to that question is a curiously mindboggling one! No one knows. Not even the USAID which has dumped billions of dollars into the coffers of the TPLF knows! That was the conclusion of the U.S. State Department Office of the Inspector (IG) in his “[Audit of USAID/Ethiopia’s Agricultural Sector Productivity Activities \(Audit Report No. 4-6663-10-003-P \(March 30, 2010\)\)](#)”.

...The [IG] audit found the [Agricultural Sector Productivity] program is contributing to the achievement of market-led economic growth and the improved resilience of farmers, pastoralists, and other beneficiaries in Ethiopia. However, *it is not possible to determine the extent of that contribution because of weaknesses in the mission’s performance management and reporting system.* Specifically, while the mission used performance indicators and targets to track progress in several areas..., the results reported for the majority of those indicators were not comparable with the targets. Moreover, *the audit was unable to determine whether the results reported in USAID/Ethiopia’s Performance Plan and Report were valid because mission staff could neither explain how the results were derived nor provide support for those reported results.* In fact, *when the audit team attempted to validate the reported results, it was unable to do so at either the mission or its implementing partners* (pages 6-12)...



In October 2010, a few days after Human Right Watch released its report on the abuses of aid in Ethiopia, USAID and the Development Assistance Group (the 27 bilateral and multilateral development agencies providing “assistance to Ethiopia”, (sometimes collectively referred to as the “international poverty pimps”) issued a statement denying the “widespread, systematic abuse of development aid in Ethiopia. Our study did not generate any evidence of systematic or widespread distortion.” *Tweedle Dee testifying as a star witness on behalf of Tweedle Dum!*

As Dambissa Moyo has convincingly argued, international aid has been a trap for Ethiopia and other African countries. The wages of international aid in Ethiopia have been a vicious cycle of dependency, endemic corruption, market distortions, deepening poverty and terminal aid addiction.

### **Post Script:**

There are two unsung heroes who have made significant contributions for decades in reporting on famines in Ethiopia. On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984, I would like to personally thank Michael Duncan Buerk, the British journalist whose reporting of the 1984 Ethiopian famine not only inspired musician Bob Geldof to launch the Live Aid concert but also brought great international awareness to the suffering of the Ethiopian people. I also wish to thank Martin Plaut, who as a BBC reporter and later as Africa Editor, exposed the siphoning off millions of dollars in Western aid to victims of the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 for weapons purchases. Walter Lippmann, the famous American writer, reporter, and political commentator observed, “There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and to shame the devil.” I do not believe there are any journalists who told the naked truth and shamed the devil about the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984-85 than Buerk and Plaut. All Ethiopians owe them a debt of gratitude.

***International aid is a vicious poverty trap for Ethiopians, but a license to steal for the TPLF!***

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