

The State Capture Onset in Ethiopia: Humanitarian Aid and Corruption

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Abstract: *The first part of this paper shows that a substantial part of the money that aid agencies gave to feed the 1984-5 Ethiopian famine victims, including those raised by Band Aid and Live Aid were siphoned off by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) to buy military weapons. I also use newly found evidences, interviews and testimonials accumulated over many years to show that famine aid scamming by the TPLF had gone beyond using humanitarian aid to purchase military weapons and feed the Front's red army. I show how humanitarian aid, as a resource in the midst of extreme scarcity, has enriched some quarters, fuelled corruption and intensified and prolonged conflicts among the warring factions of Ethiopia and legitimized the rebel fronts' operations. Humanitarian aid lured the Fronts, particularly the TPLF, to parade hundreds of thousands of peasants to Sudan, which led to the deaths of tens of thousands of them (due to overcrowding, disease epidemics, lack of regular food supplies, poor water and sanitation problems, and from being exposed to targets for bombing). The documents I examined, the interviews that I conducted and the testimonials I have gathered over many years indicate that the refugees were abused by the TPLF both during their trek to the Ethio-Sudanese border which took 4-6 weeks and within the refugee camps. According to some ex-TPLF veterans, (and their claims to be indirectly proved by the written work of foreign nationals), a good portion of the humanitarian food aid was not made available to the starving peasants of Tigray. Their statements regarding this issue are indirectly corroborated by the field and research work of foreign nationals. By all these three counts, according to them, the TPLF has committed crimes against humanity. 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, indicating a violation of the principle of neutrality and impartiality. There are also indications suggesting that the cross-border interventions by donors and aid agencies were against the multilateral agreements such as the Lomé conventions (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994). This shows that the provisions and delivery of humanitarian aid have been used to violate and perhaps diminish the sovereignty of Ethiopia. Looked in a different way, a good portion of the humanitarian aid provided by donor countries to the TPLF and other fronts fighting the Derg regime was in part for the advancement of the diplomatic and foreign policy goals as well as political and military tools of donor nations and aid agencies. It may be for this reason why they cared less about how humanitarian aid was spent, abused or pocketed by the rebel forces. The literature that I examined also provides reasons why the abuse of humanitarian*

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aid would be inevitable in conflict ridden countries such as Ethiopia. And most importantly, the evidence gathered have allowed me to inductively test one of my fundamental hypotheses: that humanitarian aid resources were and still are the sources of predation and capture in Ethiopia and that the culture of corruption and political malaise that we observe in today's Ethiopia is a byproduct of what the TPLF/EPRDF learned and adopted when it was a rebel front and such a culture of corruption was aided and abetted by humanitarian aid.

JEL Classification: D82, D74, F35, H84

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I. Introduction and Motivation

On March 3, 2010, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired a [documentary](#) indicating that a substantial part of the money that aid agencies gave, including those raised by Band Aid to feed the 1984-5 famine victims were siphoned off by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and used to buy military weapons. The report was a result of an investigative report by Mr. Martin Plaut, its Africa Editor. According to Mr. Plaut, his investigation into the American Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) documents and testimonies of former rebel leaders indicated that some of the funds that the Fronts received for humanitarian purposes were indeed diverted for military uses. The documentary prompted an angry response from Sir Bob Geldof, who had raised tens of millions of dollars to help famine victims under Band Aid by skillfully enlisting musicians of celebrity-status and prominent recording artists. Sir Geldof's anger and rejection of the BBC's documentary was shared by aid agencies such as [Christian Aid](#) which delivered the resources at the time and by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. I was briefly interviewed by Mr. Martin Plaut who was trying to ascertain the validity of the claims that humanitarian aid and financial resources were in fact siphoned off to purchase military weapons and feed the TPLF's red army. I responded to Mr. Plaut affirming that the statements were indeed true and the story is not new to many Ethiopians. And, of course, as I show below, the diversion of aid to military uses cannot be new news¹ even to a large number of aid agencies and some donor nations who were providing a good portion of the aid resources. For example, [Paulos Milkias](#) (2001:16) of Concordia University as early as 2001 has documented that a veteran leader of the TPLF had informed him that the "leadership had, against his opposition, allocated only 5% of the U.S.\$100 million relief aid to combat drought and famine in Tigray, the rest going to the TPLF organization." According to [Milkias](#) (2001: 15, 16) the late Prime Minister Zenawi had admitted that the seed money for the enterprises subsumed under the TPLF owned conglomerate, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) came from the extensive capital accumulated "diverse sources including relief aid given by NGO's and foreign governments to feed famine victims. The funds were slated for buying arms for the TPLF's guerrilla organization with over 100,000 fighters and ultimately to be invested in its enterprises."

To our disappointment, the BBC succumbed to pressure and decided to issue an [apology to Geldof](#) and his [Band Aid Trust](#) following the ruling of the BBC's Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU)². The ECU is known to have ruled that the Band Aid Trust was wrongly implicated in the siphoning of the resources it collected for charity purposes. And, unfortunately, as [Muller](#) (2012:62) correctly noted " [N]either the ECU ruling nor the Band Aid Trust's complaint did in fact engage with the truth or otherwise of the claim that relief funds had been diverted—the main point of contention was the involvement of Band Aid funds plus the potential scale of such a diversion."

This short paper goes as follows: The testimonials dealing with the siphoning off humanitarian aid to military uses is broken down into two sections. The first part briefly examines and summarizes the written documents and interviews provided by ex-TPLF leaders and fighters, several individuals and former refugees who had intimate knowledge of the matter and who had resided in the Sudan at the time. The examination affirms that humanitarian aid, including the

¹ Many Ethiopians and foreigners who have been following TPLF's practices and atrocities since it was a Front and who had intimate knowledge about the diversion of humanitarian aid to military uses were elated that the matter finally got the attention it deserved. At the same time, many of them were perplexed by the degree to which the reports unnerved the world community and by the fact that the scandal has become news, for, as the [Economist](#) clearly stated it: "It is not news that the TPLF siphoned off some money—it was widely pointed out at the time and since."

² Just before this article was about to be officially published, Mr. Plaut sent me a brief note saying: "I received informal confirmation from a very [British] senior aid agency source that the diversion story was true, but it was off the record and I could not use it."

funds provided by Band Aid/Live Aid, was indeed diverted to military uses by the TPLF ³. Part 2 uses a broad variety of sources, including books written by humanitarian aid experts, journalists, and field experts, publications and editorials from humanitarian agencies, including the testimonials of donor aid officials as well as unclassified CIA documents. The evidence I gathered are used as sources for one of my fundamental hypothesis: that humanitarian aid resources were and still are the sources of predation and capture. In particular, I hypothesize that the culture of corruption and political malaise that we observe in today's Ethiopia emanate from what the TPLF/EPRDF learned and adopted when it was a rebel front and this culture of corruption is aided and abetted by foreign aid. The TPLF learned then that it could capture humanitarian aid and use it for its unintended purposes and in some cases, donors and aid agencies would care less about the misuse and abuse of aid as long as their short-term foreign policy objectives are met. The TPLF learned then that it could dupe and scam aid agencies and get away with it. The examination of several sources and the evidence I obtained from interviewing prominent individuals led me to conclude that: (1) just like most conflict-ridden regions and countries, humanitarian aid had played a big role in prolonging the conflicts among the warring factions of Ethiopia; (2) humanitarian aid, as a relatively abundant resource in a midst of extreme scarcity was exploited, captured and misused by nearly all liberation fronts as well as the then Ethiopian government (Derg); (3) both donor nations and aid agencies knew about humanitarian aid being misused and siphoned off for military purposes by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF); (4) the delivery and provision of humanitarian aid by aid donors and agencies were used as tools to interfere in the internal affairs of Ethiopia and diminish its sovereignty; (5) international NGOs, particularly the consortium members of the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) who cooperated with REST/TPLF and ERA/EPLF and who provided food supplies, financial resources and other material failed to adhere to the principle of impartiality, neutrality, and independence; (6) humanitarian aid, as a "free" resource in the midst of extreme scarcity, enticed individuals and organized groups to maximize the benefits of this resource, to the extent that the organized groups changed the rules of the game and scammed aid agencies. And, once organized groups such as the TPLF realized that they could get away with scamming, insincerity, influence peddling, rent-seeking and even criminality; consequently, a culture of corruption got instituted within the organization ending up its *modus operandi* to this day. Lastly, this and another sisterly work of my own which focuses on the development aid-corruption nexus and abuse of aid show that, as far as the TPLF/EPRDF is concerned, abusing and hijacking of foreign aid has its roots in the 1980s when the current regime was a Front.

II. A Brief Literature Review

The stated purpose of humanitarian aid is to assist those negatively affected mostly by natural disasters but also by armed conflicts and economic challenges- with the latter two being highly controversial. The humanitarian aid industry has been growing as it involves diverse groups and actors: governmental institutions, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, private/individual as well as public communities, domestic or international religious institutions as well as musicians, and even [corporations](#) (Binder and Witte, 2007), each one with its own philosophical discourse and questionable motives. It is for this reason that humanitarian intervention involves issues of morality, political interests, and security concerns. As [Harmer and Cotterrell](#) (2005:2) note, donor nations in general provide aid for reasons of national security or to support domestic industries by strengthening trade export ties with recipient countries. Quoting the Australian Aid Agency (AusAID), [Terry](#) (1996/8:136) notes that the organization justifies providing aid to other countries by informing the Australian public that a substantial portion of the aid is "spent on goods and services in Australia which are then sent to where they are needed

³ An abridged but a more expanded version of my findings is available upon request.

overseas.”

Quoting the 2009 Global Humanitarian Assistance reports, [Kennedy and Sending](#) tell us that the amount of money spent on humanitarian assistance was roughly about \$15 billion per year with over 2,600 international aid and development agencies operating all over the world in addition to the more than 25,000 local and national organizations. Similarly, as reported in 2009, the number of NGOs operating in Ethiopia reported was in excess of 2,400. As the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Mr. Zenawi in 2009 and others (Polman, 2010), [Humanitarianinfo.org](#) acknowledge, humanitarian aid is a huge and growing industry. In many cases, humanitarian aid that begins with an emergency relief cascades into an industry that is bent to push donor aid in perpetuity.

The role of humanitarian aid has been put into question due to the various pitfalls of humanitarian interventions. For one, it has been largely ineffective and has not alleviated food insecurity. Humanitarian intervention stemming from armed conflicts and economic challenges are controversial because the disasters associated with them are largely man-made and interventions are largely political ([Curtis](#)). Humanitarian interventions in conflict-ridden regions such as the Horn of Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan and a host of other regions have been known to be counter-productive because they have been exploited, misused and manipulated by rebel fighters whose intent is to expand their subversive activities, prolong wars and conflicts ([Cunningham](#), [Lischer](#), Polman: 2010, [Lassiter](#), [Prendergast and Scott](#), [Schweizer](#)).

Humanitarian intervention is also questioned because there is always a hazy borderline between altruism and advancing one's own interests ([Seiglie](#)). One also observes an inherent tendency on the part of aid agencies and their personnel in preserving their own jobs and advancing their own careers ([Easterly: \(2002\)](#), Moyo: 2009; Polman (2010). Humanitarian aid is also controversial because it has been used to justify intervening in the internal affairs of a nation and in violating its sovereignty ([Davidson: 2012](#), [Doyle](#), [Ducey](#)). In addition to aid agencies and aid workers lacking integrity, humanitarian assistance is inherently susceptible to diversion, [corruption](#) and capture ([Khan and Lucchi](#)). As [Schweizer](#) notes, part of the difficulty is that it is rather difficult for international NGOs to adhere to the principle of impartiality, neutrality, and independence given the fact that they get their funds from countries which have their own agendas for providing humanitarian assistance. As [Volberg and Dijkzeul](#) argue, the principle of neutrality cannot be maintained due to “the increasing merging of humanitarian aid and politics.” According to [Huetter](#) (2003), even though aid is altruistic in nature, one needs to know that it is also a foreign policy tool for donor countries.

Let me expound the negative impacts of humanitarian assistance a little further by delving into the findings of researchers and aid practitioners. De Waal (1997:11, 86) argues that humanitarian agencies stunt the political contracts of a government by carrying out its functions in addition to making them to be dependent on foreign assistance. Using the occurrence of famine as a context, De Waal (1996: 201-203) argues that humanitarian aid has contributed to the decline of anti-famine systems for several reasons. For one, the entrance of aid agencies into the crisis removes the “social contract” that exists between the potential famine victims and their leaders. The 2002-2003 drought and famine crisis that took place in Ethiopia should give credence to De Waal's point. In November of 2002, Mr. Zenawi shocked both donor agencies and his critics when he declared that it was the responsibility of donor countries and agencies to rush their aid to the country. He said this after declaring that the 2002-2003 impending famine crises in Ethiopia could dwarf that of 1984-85. He said, “now that we have notified donor agencies and the world about the impending human disaster, the world community should share the blame for any lives lost.” This shocking announcement and deflection of the blame resulted from being rebuffed by some donor countries and officials, such as Clare Short, the then British minister for international development, who criticized Mr. Zenawi for exaggerating the scale of the problem in the country and by creating and exacerbating the problems by following bad agricultural land

holding policies, by making his people aid dependent and by starting war with Eritrea.

In her summary of Graham Hancock's book *-Lords of Poverty*, Sherman (1991) goes even further to say that those benefitting from foreign aid flow are actually donor countries' special interest groups, the aid bureaucracy and elites in the aid recipient countries. Prendergast (1996), using his extensive and long experience in the Greater Horn which includes Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia but also Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, presents evidence showing how humanitarian aid sustained the military capabilities of governments and rebel fronts thereby exacerbating ongoing conflicts and intensifying (unwittingly) destructions. According to [Prendergast and Scott](#) (1996: 8-9), there are two ways in which humanitarian aid may unintentionally sustain conflicts: through a direct use of humanitarian aid as an instrument of war and by contributing (albeit less overtly) "to the dynamics of conflict, [thereby] exacerbating the causes of insecurity and war." The latter may take place when humanitarian aid widens the gaps between the rich and poor or when humanitarian intervention weakens the state and its ability to mediate conflicts."

Maren (1997:38), another former relief worker and journalist, who believes that the Somali civil war during Siad Barre's reign was caused by the desire of different factions to control the large food aid that the country was receiving, shows how and why the international aid industry is a big business. He does so by going through a litany of examples, including the unbelievable fat salaries and perks paid to humanitarian agency personnel, thereby making the whole exercise of aid giving and administering insincere. Aid workers collect donations by inserting the photographs of emaciated children into their brochures while living luxurious lives in the midst of abject poverty. Using Somalia as an example, he shows how the Somali government and its elite collaborators enriched themselves by selling donated food and other aid material and by manipulating it for political purposes. In addition to creating dependency, Maren argues, international aid provides fodders to ethnic factions, political strife, wars and supports (perhaps unwittingly) dictatorial regimes. In her book that used many years of her own field work, Polman (2010) provides numerous examples of collusion among aid agencies, the global media, and warmongering regimes and rebel fronts. She shows how tyrants engineer famines then invite the international media to film the results and generate aid flows into their coffers and how the agencies prop up the same appalling regimes by paying taxes on the aid they distribute and/or by allowing their supplies to be looted by warring factions, thereby making donor aid a crime hot bed. Polman cites numerous examples in which appropriated aid distributed in refugee camps had been looted by rebel forces, fuelled further conflicts and how rebel fronts have fed and armed themselves with the resources obtained from international aid agencies and NGOs. She convincingly argues why conflict-ridden countries and regions would have been much better off without aid and the intervention of international aid agencies. No one denies humanitarian aid being always political, but a careful reading of her book and her experience and field-work based analysis inescapably leads one to conclude that there is no better critique than Polman. For example, using her own 15 years of field experiences, she gruesomely details how humanitarian aid has been exploited by elites, aid workers and journalists in West Africa, around the Horn and elsewhere in the world⁴. She illustrates how donor aid, particularly, humanitarian aid has fueled and prolonged conflicts and wars worldwide. As the former U.S. Executive Director of Doctors without Borders, [Tanguy](#) (2000) poignantly put it: it is time to acknowledge that humanitarian aid's perverse effects as aid could be hijacked, looted and even taxed. Similarly Polman (op. cit.), [Qian and Nunn](#) (2012) argue that humanitarian aid, she argued, could fuel conflicts and prolong wars, sustains ethnic cleansing, provides the resources for population displacements and migration policies, feed rebel armies (which in essence makes humanitarian aid a logistical support to rebels). In this sense, Tanguy argues, humanitarian assistance "cannot

⁴ Warning (advice) to the reader: Polman's book titled as *War Games: the Story of Aid and War in Modern Times* is actually the same book with a different title: *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?*

be considered as a ‘small change’ of larger considerations,” and, under such circumstances, the pain that aid inflicts upon could outweigh the pain it avoids. According to Tanguy, these are the structural failings of humanitarian aid that all international NGOs, the UN and donor nations have failed to recognize.

[Lassiter](#) (2007: 50-60) also illustrates several mechanisms through which humanitarian aid has been found exacerbating conflicts. One of them has to do with pure theft of resources designated for civilian use, including food, medical supplies, vehicles, communications systems that rebel fronts hold dear. Humanitarian aid also builds the war (service) economy of rebel forces by creating jobs for them as translators, drivers, armed guards and escorts and managers. It increases the revenues for businesses such as hotels, shopping and related services that rebels and/or their supporters own. The distributed resources (which may include tax and duty payments and access to foreign exchange reserves) also have the potential to buy both political and international legitimacy for rebel groups while at the same time reducing the incentives to end conflicts. [Lischer](#) (2003) describes four ways through which humanitarian aid exacerbates conflicts: (1) feeding the rebel armies who mingle with refugees; (2) relieving rebel fronts from their responsibilities from providing goods and services to their families and supporters; (3) contributing to the war economy of warring factions; and (4) providing legitimacy to combatants.

III (A): TPLF’s siphoning off and Capture of Humanitarian Aid: Testimonials from Ex-TPLF Veterans

This section presents a brief summary about the TPLF’s siphoning off humanitarian aid to buy military weapons and feed its red army. The summary is a result of a combination of focused interviews that I conducted with former TPLF senior members (key informants), careful examination of their writings, the writings of others and testimonial from former refugees who resided in the Sudan at the time. Two of the many individuals that I interviewed whose testimonies are vital are Messrs. Gebremedhin Araya (interviewed on October 25, 2009) and Mekonnen Zelelew (interviewed on October 6, 2009). The interview was conducted over the phone and taking notes of their answers to several of my specific questions. The questions dealt about the validity of the claims made about humanitarian aid being diverted to military uses, the key player(s) and the roles they played in allocating the diverted funds and the amount of resources involved. The two individuals have written and talked extensively about these several issues and I wanted to confirm the validity of those claims by asking them different questions. The former was the treasurer of the Front while the latter was a former member and ex-fighter of the Front. Mr. Zelelew has told me that he was stationed in the Sudan serving the TPLF indicating that he knew what the TPLF did in Sudan in the 1980s. Mr. Araya confirmed during my interview with him what he has been writing and testifying all along for more than two decades. In summary, Mr. Araya testified to me that he knew the TPLF’s intentional diversion of humanitarian aid to military purposes because he himself was deeply involved into it. The following is a shortened version of his testimony.

First, the TPLF had forcefully rounded and paraded tens of thousands of starving Ethiopian peasants to Sudan in a premeditated fashion. Many refugees were abused and maltreated by the Front while they were being paraded and also after they arrived into the make-shift camps located in Eastern Sudan. For example, the TPLF used false pretexts and scare tactics, coercions and intimidations in uprooting peasants from their homes and push them into exile, all done without adequate preparations. As a result, many individuals were forcefully separated from their families. The elderly, the malnourished and the weakened were left at their homes since only the able-bodied folks were thought to make the journey which took 4-6 weeks. Thousands who could not finish the trip were exposed to diseases and increased malnutrition in addition to being feasts of wild animals such as hyenas. The tens of thousands who arrived into the refugee camps were also maltreated by the TPLF cadres while at the same time being exposed to communicable

diseases. The frailty peasants who were trekking in mass also became targets of the Derg's fighter jets and helicopter gunships, thanks to the unscrupulous TPLF tactics which made the human trek become visible to the enemy, Mr. Araya told us. Many thousands died as a result because the TPLF leaders saw humanitarian aid supplies as strategic resources for the war front.

Supporting Mr. Araya's statements, Mr. Asgede Gebrselassie, one of the 11 founding members of the TPLF and author of a book entitled as *Gahdi (in Tigrigna)*, has stated that at least 50,000 Tigrayans had perished on the road to Sudan and many more died of diseases after arriving in the makeshift camps.⁵ According to Mr. Araya, all that the TPLF leaders wanted to make sure was the potential millions of dollars that would go into their coffers, which has to be attained by displaying the dislocated Tigrayan peasants to journalists and aid agencies. They cared less about the perils that the refugees would face when making the long trip to Sudan. Mr. Gebrselassie is known to have stated in the same book that the exodus turning to be a blessing in disguise for the TPLF, allowing it to receive an enormous amount of food and millions of dollars in aid. The TPLF, Mr. Araya and others say, sordidly exploited human misery to advance its own military interests. When I asked him if they believe that donor aid and the strong desire to access it intensified the famine victims' suffering, instead of ameliorating it, Mr. Araya's response was an unequivocal "Yes" further suggesting that humanitarian resources had played an indirect role in the crimes against humanity committed by the TPLF.

Several other and highly respected and reputable ex-TPLF veterans such as Dr. Aregawi Berhe (cofounder and former Commander of the rebel army), Asgede Gebrselassie (op. cit.), and Mr. Mekonnen Zelelew (op. cit.) have corroborated Mr. Araya's accounts. Authors such as DeMars (1992:7), [investigative report from Gellaw](#) and Tareke (2009: 108) also document that TPLF's coercive parading of starving peasants to the Sudan exacerbated the starvation and malnutrition of peasants. Tareke (2009) goes even farther to say that many of the forcefully paraded peasants were abused and maltreated by their TPLF handlers while in the refugee camps. This also exposed the weak and malnourished children to become easy prey for the TPLF photographers, who rushed these pictures into the Sudan in order to show them to the international journalists and aid donor agencies. Once photographing was finished, the weakened peasants were left alone as if they could only be useful for the show. The TPLF cadres were also engaged in selecting the most malnourished, the sickest and weakest peasants already in the camp to be photographed by Western journalists and aid representatives. Once this careful selection gets completed, the TPLF cadres would invite NGOs and a select group of journalists representing the world-wide media to take pictures and disseminate them for immediate world-wide consumption.

Secondly, Mr. Araya has testified to me that the TPLF had consciously committed crimes by scamming donors, in which he himself was involved in the fraudulent acts. As Mr. Araya described it in detail, the scamming and defrauding was accomplished by hoarding some of the donated food in eastern Sudan and selling it back to the donors for cash. We did it by masquerading ourselves as Sudanese merchants, Mr. Araya emphasized. Adding insult to injury, a significant portion of the warehouse was filled with sand instead of food⁶, Mr. Araya emphatically stated.

⁵ Please see also the reports of [Gelaw](#) (2009)-"Ethiopia - Tigrayans outraged over EFFORT-led corruption."

⁶ Many foreigners are puzzled by the candid photograph of TPLF cadres seen counting and recording a stash of cash handed over to them by donor agent Mr. Max Peberdy. The photograph could be seen here, for example: <http://www.ethiomeia.com/course/6110.html>. However, Gebremedhin's account indicates that they did so because donor agencies, particularly the Australians demanded that this be done. They wanted to assure themselves that the food was indeed purchased from real merchants and distributed to the starving peasants.

Thirdly, Mr. Araya has told me, just like he told many others, that humanitarian aid was siphoned off to military uses. [Dr. Berhe](#) even went further to tell us what was purchased with the donated funds: anti-tank mines, ammunition, radio communication, vehicles and fuel.

Furthermore, Mr. Zelelew confirmed to me that Mr. G/Medhin Araya indeed was the financial officer and top operator of the TPLF who himself was involved in deceiving donor aid agents. He told me that what Mr. Araya has been saying was largely true but he did not hide his consternation about Mr. Araya's exaggerations. What was amazing on the part of the TPLF leaders who concocted the deception scheme, Mr. Zelelew emphasized, was their shameless boasting about their abilities in hoodwinking/gulling foreign donors and the success of their mischievous tactics. As Mr. Zelelew put it, the shameless expression went like this: "We prospered by duping the naïve white men using their own donated assets."

Confirming Mr. Araya's testimonies, Mr. Zelelew told me that the food and non-food aid that the Fronts received was so overwhelming to the extent that the Front could not have enough human and logistical resources to transport them to the Ethio-Sudanese border, to the extent of the sheer aid flow magnitude crowding the Port of Sudan (and, according to [Burton](#) (1994: 58), the handover humanitarian aid to the Fronts "took place at Port Sudan, thereby relieving the NGO of responsibility for arranging transport to the border.") When both the Sudanese authorities and Western donors such as France complained about the issue, the TPLF conceived yet another "malicious idea"- telling the French that they needed more transport trucks. Other Western nations and Japan also sent several trucks to help transport the donated food. According to him, REST had received at least 250 heavy duty Mercedes Benz trucks and at least 89 Toyota Land Cruiser SUVs accompanied by million barrels of fuel. REST was also in possession of at least 80 heavy duty transport trucks wearing Sudanese license plates which were obtained by confiscating individual business owners, but most of confiscated from the Ethiopian regime using many operations. Mr. Zelelew continued: "The Front had many truck and a fleet of maintenance facilities within Sudan. These transportation vehicles became instrumental in serving as the seed money for the TPLF's parastatals and the building of the TPLF business empire. Add to these the amount of money and other assets the TPLF looted through its many operations. So, I am in agreement with Mr. G/Medhin Araya's accounts. However, in my opinion, and the opinions of many Tigrayans, I believe Mr. Araya at times inflates some of the numbers, including the amount of food converted to cash and this is not good for history."

Fifthly, Mr. Araya and Zelelew have informed me and my own investigations using several sources indicate that a good portion of the millions of dollars provided by donors and humanitarian agencies to feed famine victims has been the major source of the seed money for the now richest ruling ethnic-based and political party-owned oligarchy in the world- the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (hereafter –EFFORT). This was confirmed by Messrs. Berhe, Gebresellassie, Zelelew (op. cit.), Mr. Gebru Asrat (former Central Committee member of the TPLF who is now in the opposition camp) and even by Messrs. Abadi Zemu and Arkebe Equbay, two of the current powerbrokers of the TPLF⁷. As reported in a classified testimony that he gave to former American Ambassador to Ethiopia, Donald Yamamoto (wiki leaks, 2011), Mr. [Seeye Abraha](#) (former commander of the rebel army, former defense minister and Board Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of EFFORT) admitted also that the TPLF had indeed received huge amounts of food and nonfood aid from the west throughout the 1980s.

Sixthly, the fact Mr. Seeye Abraha and others acknowledged to have happened was confirmed to me by one of the former Addis Ababa Chamber of Commerce presidents (whom I

⁷ See, [Vaughn and Gebremickail](#) (2011) for the former, and [Young](#) (1997:85), for the latter.)

had a brief interview). That is, he acknowledged to me that the seed money for TPLF-owned conglomerates and “endowment” companies subsumed under- EFFORT came from siphoning off humanitarian aid as well as ransacking of banks, government structures and local businesses. He went even further to tell me that this political-party controlled and owned “endowment” companies “receive preferential access to limited credit and/or foreign exchange reserves, or treatment on government bids and contracts, customs clearance, and import/export license.”

According to Messrs. Asrat, Abraha, and Berhe (op. cit.), western nations had provided to the Fronts, particularly to the TPLF and EPLF all kind of aid using humanitarian assistance as a cover. Mr. Asrat goes even to say that [both Western nations and aid agencies gave them knowing full well that the aid would be diverted for military purposes](#). To our knowledge, no Western nation who provided the aid at the time has denied their claims.

Moreover, Messrs. Araya and Zelelew informed me that the floodgates of donor aid which went to TPLF’s coffers included several hundred metric tons of food such as cereal and flour, several tons of cooking oil, sugar, tea, biscuits, hundreds of heavy duty transport trucks and SUVs accompanied by at least 5 million barrels of unleaded fuel, 4 million barrels of diesel fuel, medicines, clothing, tents, digging tools and earth moving equipment as well as cash. Messrs. Araya and Zelelew mention the \$2 million aid in cash that Australians sent as an example. A substantial portion of the donated food was used to feed the red army of the TPLF.

Mr. Araya also told me the TPLF hid close to 1700 piles (each pile constituting 30,000 quintals) of food from the starving peasants all the way until 1987, which later got spoiled by the abundant rains of 1987. His claim was confirmed by other TPLF combatants and indirectly by foreign field work researchers. His claim about the spoiled food being the cause of friction between Messrs. Meles Zenawi, Sibhat Nega, Abay Tsehaye and Arkebe Equbay, on the one hand, and TPLF fighters, on the other hand, is also confirmed to be true. However, I believe Mr. Araya’s numbers regarding the amount of the hidden (also of the spoiled) piles of food is perhaps exaggerated.

Last but not least, according to Messrs. Araya and Zelelew (and as confirmed by my investigation of written documents), the TPLF leaders sold excess food and other supplies to Sudanese Merchants and a good portion of the donated food, medicine, etc. made it to Middle Eastern markets other than Sudan. However, my investigation is unable to determine the exact amount of money that the TPLF made from selling humanitarian aid.

According to Messrs. Araya and Aregawi and many other ex-TPLF combatants, 95% of the \$100 million or so that was raised by Sir Geldof and co.’s Band Aid fundraising campaign which was given to TPLF was indeed *allocated*⁸ for military purposes. The delivery of the funds were facilitated by the two foreign representatives of the Front, Messrs. Seyoum Mesfin and Berhane Gebre Kristos and the cash was given to Messrs. Zenawi and Sibhat Nega, who traveled to Europe to receive the funds and who in turn put a good portion of the money aside in European banks under their own individual accounts. My investigation of written documents by aid agencies and some Western officials confirm that individual bank accounts were indeed opened in Europe for the TPLF. However, my investigation so far is unable to find out under exactly whose name(s) was the bank the account(s) opened and the exact amount of cash involved, even though there is every indication that the amount of cash that the Front received exceeds more than the nearly \$100 million it received from Band Aid. Most importantly, my investigation so far is unable determine how much of the 95% of the nearly \$100 million that surely was allocated was actually siphoned off for military purposes. The confusion about the allocation and actual spending as well as how much of the allocated funds were siphoned off to military purposes are the basis for much of the controversy and confusion among aid agencies, Sir Geldof’s Band Aid

⁸ Regarding Dr. Berhe’s accounts of allocation, please see the print version of his book in Berhe (2009: 217-8), or the earlier and [online version](#) of Berhe (2008: 226-7).

Trust, journalists and even the whistleblowers themselves. The principle of fungibility and my examinations of what has been written and said so far about this same issue indicate to me that no one, including the top TPLF leaders, would be able to ascertain the exact allocation of those funds. The issue is confounded by the fact that some donors cared less about how and for what the funds were used (spent) as long as their own diplomatic and foreign policy goals were advanced.

It is also important to note that Dr. Berhe's accounts, delivered both in writing (in both English and Amharic) and in the speeches he delivered regarding the allocation of the donated funds and related matters have been pretty consistent. The accounts that he provided in writing have also been peer reviewed and vetted by referees and his dissertation advisors, contrary to what Sir Geldof seem to tell us. Moreover, he has expressed his willingness to testify under oath, as he promised to do so in his "[Open Letter to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon](#)", which was written on May 11, 2010.

I now leave the reader with the following (abbreviated version) despair of Mr. Berhe regarding the allocation of the cash funds donated by Band Aid (a loose and abbreviated [translation](#) from Amharic):

I suggested for the Marxist–Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) inauguration to be postponed so that both the resources and the well-experienced fighters could be used to save the lives of the people who were dying of starvation. I realized that we could be committing the similar crimes that the Derg regime committed by spending millions of dollars to celebrate the 10th anniversary of its ascendancy and rise to power, while at the same time millions of Ethiopians were starving to death. My pleas were rejected by Messrs. Zenawi, Sibhat Nega, Seyoum Mesfin and their collaborators. Later on, I objected the manner in which the \$100 million collected from donors were allocated. Here again, my objection was quickly rebuffed by Mr. Zenawi and Sibhat Nega. *When I learned that no one was supporting my plea, I realized that I was dealing with very cruel beasts. But again, even wild beasts are not so cruel to their own kin and kinds. This shows that Meles and Co. are a special kind of cruel and cannibalistic beasts.*

The brief testimonials I presented above strongly indicate that diversion of relief supplies away from affected communities has taken place and that the TPLF has unscrupulously manipulated humanitarian aid and greatly profited from it. As is the case elsewhere, particularly in conflict-ridden regions, humanitarian aid has also served as an asset for rebel fronts and was co-opted as a strategic resource thereby prolonging the war and conflicts among the Ethiopian warring factions. In addition, several witnesses have told me that all rebel fighters, including the EPLF have used the refugee camps and international aid clinics in eastern Sudan as their bases of operations. The refugee camps and clinics were infiltrated by rebel fighters and cadres who falsely claimed of being driven out of their villages and residences. The facilities funded and provided by aid agencies were used to recruit more members. These same "refugees" were able to gain access to jobs (as staffers of distribution centers (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994), drivers, translators, guards and guides), resources, and receive aid. In the case of the TPLF, it is known to have enjoyed its own complete control of the refugee camps. This is the classic case of humanitarian aid being used to oil the war economy. The TPLF is also known to have benefited from its supporters who had established businesses around the refugee camps. The testimonies of the aforementioned ex-veterans of the TPLF indicated that humanitarian aid agencies gave their resources to REST and EPLF's ERA knowing full well that the REST and TPLF, ERA and EPLF were one and the same. This shows that aid agencies were not neutral at all even though "neutrality" is one of the cardinal principles of humanitarian assistance.

Most importantly, humanitarian aid had fostered corruption and was the basis for the onset of state capture in Ethiopia. It is important to note that the tens of millions of dollars dolled to the TPLF by donors has played a big role in the establishment of an ethnic-based oligarchy. Humanitarian aid lured organized groups such as the TPLF to the extent that the Front, according to several ex-TPLF veterans, committed crimes against humanity because the desire to access it

played as the only huge factor for the TPLF to forcefully evacuate hundreds of thousands of peasants from their own villages and parade them to refugee camps in eastern Sudan. As the two ex-combatants of the TPLF, namely, [Tesfay Atsbeha and Kahsay Berhe](#)⁹ argue, withholding life-saving donations from starving Ethiopians and scamming aid agencies is tantamount to crime against humanity and they should be brought to justice. Their argument is in line with that of the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC). According to them, the TPLF's actions to hide the food, which ended up being spoiled has also deprived famine victims from accessing and using the donated food, which in effect is a crime against humanity. It also shows that TPLF's control of life-saving humanitarian resources enabled it to control the peasants thereby resulting in greater suffering. I surmise that such a misuse of foreign aid and the experience of getting away from being accountable have been carried on and being practiced in regards to the development aid by the TPLF/EPRDF- an issue I try to prove using another sisterly paper that deals with the development aid-corruption nexus.

III (B): TPLF's siphoning off and Capture of Humanitarian Aid: Testimonials from Non-TPLF Veterans

This section briefly summarizes the evidence I have gathered regarding TPLF's use of humanitarian aid for military purposes, by focusing on what foreign officials, aid agency personnel and foreign journalists had to say about it.

We begin with the book entitled as: [Without Troops & Tanks: Humanitarianism Intervention in Ethiopia & Eritrea](#) (1994), written by Duffield and Prendergast. The book is mostly about the activities of the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) which was a consortium of humanitarian agencies (and effectively donor nations as well) which was deeply involved in funneling cross-border humanitarian assistance from Sudan to Eritrea and Tigray. According to Duffield and Prendergast (1994), there were serious and bitter disagreements among international humanitarian agencies on the mechanisms of supplying food to famine victims. Those humanitarian groups who want to maintain their neutrality and also respect the territorial integrity of Ethiopia argued against establishing the Ethio-Sudanese cross-border food supply chains and hence wanted to engage the Derg regime instead of the Fronts. On the other hand, those who became sympathetic to the causes of the rebels and who wanted to work with REST and ERA went ahead and formed the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) in 1981. The ERD became the major supplier unsanctioned humanitarian aid to the TPLF and EPLF (and OLF) rebel-held areas. As Duffield and Prendergast (p. xv) tell us, the ERD had played a "pivotal and often controversial role in channeling emergency aid into these areas." Duffield and Prendergast (p. 29) tell us that, in addition to humanitarian assistance helping them gain international legitimacy, the Fronts were helped by the influx of humanitarian assistance to expand their resources, reduce their burden from public assistance and enhance their military capabilities and successfully "turned social dislocation and privation into means of mass mobilization and political consolidation." Both Western nations and donor NGOs made sure that the Fronts had "enough trucking capacity" as, for example, the ICRC providing 74 trucks to REST to be used for the Kassala route alone (p. 109), the U.S. providing at least 150 trucks (p.65) in which, by 1988, REST's fleet of trucks amounted at least 183 transport trucks "plus 100 Sudanese commercial lorries" (p. 141.). It appears that REST had been given more trucks than what Duffield and Prendergast seem to know or admit: For example, Human Rights Watch (["Evil Days"](#), p. 177) says the U.S. alone for example, had delivered 150 trucks by 1985 alone out of the 240 trucks that it had promised to give. The ICRC had promised to deliver 81 trucks to REST and relief agencies in 1987 alone

⁹ As ex-veterans of TPLF, Messrs. Atsbeha and Kahsay Berhe say that cruelties and hypocrisies are trademarks of the TPLF leadership and they [happen to know that transparency, accountability, and justice were never practiced during the entire armed struggle](#).

(“[Starving Tigray](#)”, p. 204). Regarding other forms of assistance, Duffield and Prendergast (P. 105-06) say, at one point alone and around 1987, the cash assistance to Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and Eritrean Relief Agency (ERA) amounted over \$6 million. Duffield and Prendergast (P. 145) say that thanks to TPLF’s strategic alliance with local merchants and commercial farmers, “... REST contracted local merchants who purchased, bagged, stored, and transported the grain to distribution sites.” As shown elsewhere in this paper, the “contractors” and “merchants” that REST had “hired” and purchased the “food” from were actually Mr. G/Medhin Araya and other TPLF cadres.

Corroborating Mr. Araya’s statements, Duffield and Prendergast (p.142) tell us that bank accounts were opened for both ERA and REST in Europe in order to reimburse their expenditures for transporting the food aid to rebel-held areas. NGO support for TPLF was so important to the Fronts that “...the leadership of the Fronts subsequently thanked ERD for helping their struggle” (p. 62). ERD alone “made available around \$350 million in cash and goods in kind, almost all of it from 1984 ... the principle of fungibility... would suggest that substitution did allow the Fronts to concentrate their resources in securing their defence and ultimately military victory... Substitution meant that the Fronts could sustain and marshal the support of the growing number of people under their expanding areas of administration with the help of international humanitarian assistance.” (pp. 163-64.) According to [Borton](#) (1994:1), the amount of non-food aid emergency assistance provided by [Emergency Relief Desk (ERD) consortia member] NGOs in 1988 alone was \$209 million. Borton (p. 56) also says that even though the assistance provided by ERD member NGOs accounts for the bulk of the assistance given to ERA and REST, several other organizations directly provided substantial volume of assistance to ERA and REST.

Duffield and Prendergast (pp.138-39) say that humanitarian aid supplied foods were siphoned off by the Fronts to military use but it was not until 1990 that the ERD learned about it. Emphasizing the counterproductive nature of the aid largess, Duffield and Prendergast (p. 139) tell us that “the mobilization of unprecedented number of soldiers had reduced rural productive capacity [within Tigray] and the Front’s scope of self-generated economic activity.” As reported in [the BBC’s documentary](#), some members of the TPLF leadership had told Robert Houdek, the senior U.S. diplomat in Ethiopia in 1980s, that some of the aid money was indeed diverted for military use, further indicating that U.S. officials’ knowledge at the time about the diversion of humanitarian aid to military uses. Similarly, a former Band Aid Field Director in Ethiopia from 1985-91, John James, tell us that [at least 20% of the donated humanitarian aid was diverted to rebels](#). Edward Girardet, one of the western journalists who covered the region at the time noted that he has no doubt humanitarian aid was being diverted to the Fronts, but he also notes about his [disappointments regarding TPLF’s mischiefs](#):

...Everything was elaborate while the show was on [around the refugee camps], but the moment one left it was a different matter. Once I visited a bustling "government displaced centre" near the Sudanese border. Twenty minutes after leaving I returned because I had forgotten my jacket. The camp was empty. It had been a complete charade in a bid to solicit international sympathy and funding.

Other writers, humanitarian agencies, and foreign government representatives have also written about the heartless and well-calibrated exodus, the siphoning off aid to buy military hardware and using it to feed the rebel army. These include [Nicholas Winer, former director of Oxfam in Sudan and Ethiopia](#), [Gelaw \(2009\) who obtained the information from Mr. Abraha Belai](#), [The Economist](#) (March 8, 2010), and [Human Rights Watch, 1991: 194-95](#). The repeated reports from the Refugee Group (such as 1986:2, 1992:8), Clark (1986: 17, 18) and HRW’s (p. 194) also strongly suggest that the massive influx to the Sudan would not have taken place without the TPLF’s decision to open the ‘pipeline’ and set-up of the 40 or so transit centers and provide the trek guides. Regarding the parading of peasants, HRW (pp. 204, 206) reports that, in the short-term, “the loss of people from central Tigray and controlling the mass exodus and

diversion of resources” seemed to make the TPLF to be militarily vulnerable but the famine and the mass evacuation of peasants to the Sudan dramatically changed its military strategy, turning the [“Tigray people's experience of famine into an asset -- perhaps its greatest asset.”](#) Regarding how humanitarian aid had been so useful to the Fronts, HRW (P.190) wrote (see: [“War and the Use of Relief as a Weapon in Eritrea”](#)):

...The relief effort also supported the fronts. This took several forms. One was the feeding of militiamen, who were in other respects poor farmers, and who received rations from their local baitos which distributed to the poor on behalf of ERA and REST. Another was beneficiaries contributing some relief supplies to fighters, without direct coercion, but undoubtedly with some social pressure.

Hendrie (1996:37, 42) argues that the refugee influx was “only indirectly a consequence of the war and more directly a result of the politicization of humanitarian aid to the war zones...” assisted with the TPLF’s setting up of about 40 transit stops close to the Sudanese border in 1984. As a result, some 200,000 Tigrayans arrived in Sudan between October 1984 and May 1995, she says. According to Hendrie, it was partly due to their disappointments regarding the inadequate supplies at the refugee camps and partly to take advantage of the returning rains in 1985 that the refugees began heading back home, disregarding the advices of TPLF and aid agency officials. On May 7 and 8, 1985, for example, over 4,500 refugees walked out of the Safawa refugee camp and headed back to the border (towards Ethiopia). In June, 1985 alone, over 54,000 refugees left the camps. This was followed by a further subsequent influx of 100,000 Tigrayans leaving the Sudan- a trip which took 4-6 weeks to reach the villages. “... [A]id workers found it difficult to comprehend why people were moving into different directions across borders at the same time...”^{10, 11}

Clark (1986) also attributes the refugee exodus (and the subsequent deaths of 10,000-15,000 at the refugee camps alone, according to him) to the TPLF’s opening of “pipeline” starting from its controlled areas to eastern Sudan and the accompanying of migrating Tigrayans by TPLF cadres. Quoting Jason Clay¹² of Cultural Survival who happened to conduct a survey about peasant migration, Clark (1986: 17, 18) states that the ‘pipeline’ and TPLF cadre’s meetings held at the migrants’ home villages were critical in the migration process and 85% of those surveyed by Clay had reported the TPLF cadres to have accompanied them all the way from their villages towards eastern Sudan. These are in essence similar accounts to that of Mr. Araya regarding the parading and uprooting process, despite the fact that Mr. Araya goes deep into more detail.¹³ As

¹⁰ This confusion may be a result of an asymmetry of information between TPLF personnel and aid agency personnel. As Mr. Araya and others extensively documented, the TPLF was mobilizing (using coercion and other means) peasants to leave their home for the Sudan. It appears that aid agencies either didn’t understand the extent of the mobilization for the exodus or did not believe what TPLF cadres were telling them. People were moving in both directions in part because they found they were misled by the TPLF cadres and were disappointed about the harsh conditions of the refugee camps.

¹¹ [Hammond \(2005\)](#) as well as HRW and UNCR on several occasions have indicated that those who stayed in the refugee camps and who wanted to go back home after the EPRDF took power in 1991, lost their claims to land in their villages of origin, since the local governance councils had already allocated their lands to new households.

¹² See also, Clay, Jason and Bonnie Holcomb (1986): [The Politics and the Ethiopian Famine: 1984 – 1985](#), Cultural Survival Inc. Peterborough, N.H. and Cambridge, Mass.

¹³ In the relatively expanded version of the account, Mr. Araya goes in detail putting the hundreds of thousands peasants to be uprooted from regions of Tiwaba, Engurja and Sefewa and the names of the leading commanders, such as Ashebir Nir’ayo who led the instigation and rounding off would be refugees.

Clark and other aid agencies' representatives indicate, the refugee camps became overwhelmed (which led to the deaths of thousands) in part because of hasty migration instigated by the TPLF and in part due to the refusal by aid agencies and the UNHCR to heed TPLF/REST's warnings that more refugees were on their way to the Sudanese border.

Prendergast and Scott (1996: 6), in their occasional paper they prepared for U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) entitled as "[Aid with Integrity...](#)", also show that the Fronts, which included the TPLF, have diverted donor aid, including food, cooking oil, sugar and drugs, which flooded the Middle Eastern markets going out through the back door via Port-Sudan, or traded for petroleum. According to [Burton](#), (1994: 58), the handover of humanitarian aid to the Fronts "took place at Port Sudan, thereby relieving the NGO's responsibility for arranging transport to the border." Prendergast and Scott (1996), quoting Andrew Natsios, who served as Disaster Assistant (1989-91) and Administrator of the USAID (2001-2005), say that the TPLF was engaged in several racketeering activities when it was a Front and is known to have diverted donor resources to underwrite its war efforts through aid. One of them included the use of illegal and dual exchange rates that the Fronts' agents were conducting in Saudi Arabia. Quoting Natsios, the authors in the same USAID analysis (P. 8) wrote: "One rebel Ethiopian group, the TPLF, which received foreign exchange to do internal purchase, placed what was in essence a 43% overcharge on their currency exchange, often made in the Middle East." Quoting Craig Calhoun and Webb and von Braun, [Ducey argues that](#), given the huge volume of food aid delivered to be used in the Tigray region, deaths from starvation should never had taken place unless the TPLF had diverted the aid from starving people¹⁴. This diversion could well include the several stockpiles of donated food which were put away from starving peasants and got rotten that Mr. Araya and others described to us. Ducey also says both the Derg regime and the Fronts misused humanitarian food, and humanitarian aid was indeed a vehicle to prolonging the conflicts between warring factions and as a source of corruption. As we reported earlier, the CIA Document #85-10039 (2002: 2443)¹⁵ reports aid being diverted to military purposes by the Fronts, as do Wadhams (2010) and the [BBC's Horrocks](#). In the highly regarded, extensive and ongoing report, Anonymous (pp. 21-22 and elsewhere) says that, thanks to the TPLF-secretly held REST, the "NGO" became a vehicle for the TPLF to amass enormous amount of resources. These same resources, they say, allowed the Front to retain and even expand its legitimacy among the civilian population within Tigray. They gave the TPLF the opportunity to control dissent among the civilian population, enabled it to feed its red army, allowed it to expand its military arsenals and also generate foreign exchange reserves.

In summary, my investigations indicate that Sir Bob Geldof is wildly wrong in claiming that "[no single penny went to buy anything else but food](#)."¹⁶ Regarding the amount of cash

¹⁴ This could well be due to the fact that the TPLF hid several tons of food under the make-shift warehouses that Mr. Araya described in detail ended being spoiled by the 1987 heavy rains.

¹⁵ In a representation of Mr. Araya's testimony to the Australians, a [blogger](#) also quotes some CIA documentation which says that "some funds [meant] for relief operations ... are almost certainly being diverted for military purposes"

¹⁶ Sir Geldof and some members of the aid industry have tried to dismiss the claims made by Ex-TPLF veterans arguing that most of those who are now speaking have joined the opposition camp. Though these attacks may seem reasonable, it is important to note that, as the [Economist](#) noted, "It is not news that the TPLF siphoned off some money—it was widely pointed out at the time and since..." This echoes what the documents that we reviewed about belonging to HRW, Doctors without Borders, CIA, etc. The accounts of dissidents are largely supported by the aid personnel who were deeply involved at the time. Most importantly, Sir Geldof and the aid industry should know that the testimonials provided by some of them, particularly that of Dr. Aregawi Berhe's have been vetted by professionals and have gone through rigorously peer-reviewed processes before appearing at the printing presses. These highly respected and popular veterans have also availed themselves to any

converted for military purposes, it is clear that the TPLF leadership had indeed allocated the near \$100 million cash donated by Band Aid to be allocated as follows: 50% for [Marxist–Leninist League of Tigray’s \(MLLT\)](#) consolidation; 45% for TPLF activities; and 5% for the famine victims. Mr. Zenawi and Sibhat Nega were indeed behind such an allocation and bank accounts were opened in Europe to take care of these funds. It is also true that such an allocation had created tense disagreements among the TPLF leadership and seems to have been the culprit behind the ultimate expulsion of Aregawi Berhe and a few more others from the leadership and membership of the Front. The accounts of several donor agency personnel and the testimonials of ex-TPLF combatants indicate that humanitarian aid has showered the TPLF more hard currency than the \$100 million it received from Band Aid and similar activities. The selling of humanitarian aid into the Sudanese and Middle Eastern markets has also helped the Front to garner a substantial amount of cash which was used to buy military hardware. [My investigation indeed indicate that the \\$500,000 that Mr. Max Peberdy of Christian Aid was seen passing to Mr. Araya and others](#) was indeed a very small amount of money that the Front received in cash. It is indeed also a pittance compared to the millions of dollars the TPLF is claimed to have garnered from donations and the selling of “excess” food aid in Middle Eastern markets. However, both the fungibility of funds and the secretive nature of the Front played and would continue to play as huge obstacles in ascertaining if and how much of those funds which have been allocated as described and decided by the Front’s leadership were actually implemented. I am convinced that no one, including top leaders of the TPLF would be able to ascertain the exact allocations (other than the *allocation* of the near \$100 million that Band Aid passed on to the TPLF leadership), expenditures and conversions of humanitarian aid for military purposes.

I like to point out one important point here: even though Mr. Araya’s testimonials are largely true and the accounts he made through his write-ups are largely consistent with each other, my examination indicate that Mr. Araya at times seems to confuse between what had been planned and allocated with what effectively had transpired or was spent.¹⁷ I cite three examples to support this contention: (1) According to Mr. Araya’s testimonies, the number of people to be mobilized and paraded from the regions of Tiwaba, Engurja, and Safewa to eastern Sudan were 250,000, 500,000 and 350,000, respectively. My investigation of the documents written by donor agencies and international of NGOs as well as donor nations indicate that the total number of Tigrayans who arrived at the refugee camps in east Sudan were about 350,000-400,000. Regarding the grain and flour transported to TPLF- held areas and put aside in make-shift warehouses (covered with thin plastic, shrubs, and tree shades) and warehouses confiscated from merchants, Mr. Araya says that total amounted to 1700 piles, each pile constituting 30,000 quintals or about 3,300 tons- a total of more than 5.6 million tons. According to Mr. Araya, this total was enough to feed the TPLF’s red army for 5 full years plus cover the daily birr 14 per day that each fighter was being paid. According to him, the stockpiles were placed along the routes from Angerb to Tekeze, from Tekeze to Adebaguna- covering regional areas such as Sifraro, Adi Hagerai, Adi Aw-Ala, Adi-Nebra-eed, etc., in which a substantial portion of it got spoiled. Even though my interviewees did not deny the existence of the stockpiles and spoilage, none of them could tell us the exact amount, however. Regarding the amount of funds that the TPLF received in cash, my investigation has led me to believe that it was in tens of millions of dollars (according to Duffield and Prendergast, the cash and goods in kind the ERD alone made available to the Fronts amounted to \$350 million by 1984), but, here again, no one knows the exact amount the Front received in cash. And neither these figures described above reflect nor my study looked into the

testimonials that could be conducted under oath as [the open letter to UN Secretary General, Gen Ban Ki Moon from Dr. Berhe attests](#).

¹⁷ This does not imply any malice intent on the part of Mr. Araya, for the confusion could have emanated from the reasons that I spelled out above and his absence from the activities of the front since the late 1980s.

millions of dollars that the Front received from other countries, countries of the Middle East, in particular. How much cash did the TPLF raise by selling a portion of the humanitarian aid to Sudanese merchants and by rerouting it to Middle Eastern markets? This amount also seems to be in millions, but my investigation again has failed to pinpoint the exact or even the proximate amount.

IV. Summary, Implication and Conclusion

Professor Mesfin Wolde-Mariam might have asked Ethiopians to pledge not to show the skeletal bodies of famine victims in order to elicit charity from donors (Lautze, Raven-Roberts and Erkinch, 2009). But, as [Lischer \(2003: 81\) noted](#), it should have been clear to anyone at the outset that highly organized and politicized groups such as the TPLF were prone to viewing “humanitarian aid as a resource with which to further their political and military goals...” and as [Joelle Tanguy, U.S. Executive Director, Medecins Sans Frontieres \(MSF\) noted](#), in general, opportunistic behavior arises with aid as a resource with elites wanting to benefit from it and having the strong desire to devise mechanisms to exploit it. As the testimonials of Messrs. Araya, Berhe, several former TPLF leaders, treasurers, as well as personnel representing donor governments and donor agencies and journalists attest, TPLF’s orchestrations and choreographing of the refugee exodus led to its survival and expansion. In the words of Mr. Araya and Dr. Berhe, as planned, the staged exodus and the misery of thousands of innocent peasants became a goldmine for the TPLF. According to Mr. Araya, the regime’s denying of humanitarian aid, misusing donor aid and access to medical assistance to the civilian population in the Somali region of Ethiopia, as reported by [VOA news](#), [New York Times](#), and [Doctors without Borders](#), is similar to what it practiced when the TPLF was a Front. The fraudulent and deceptive acts and operations- which is tantamount to holding the famine victims hostage, allowed the TPLF predatory leadership to capture humanitarian aid and increase its resource largesse. At the same time, humanitarian aid resources and the temptation to grab them became accessories to death chambers to tens of thousands of starving peasants, even though there is no denying that the aid had saved the lives of tens of thousands as well. The orchestrations in turn allowed Western media outlets garner increased viewership and readership; photojournalists to be famous; aid agencies to secure more aid and power; those working for the aid industry to secure their jobs; [musicians extol themselves to their celebrity status](#); donor governments and their personnel find political fodder to feed on and even interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation by ignoring cross-border conventions (Duffield and Prendergast 1994:73). The looted, racketeered and hijacked humanitarian aid enabled the TPLF to create an ethnic-based oligopolistic and highly predatory economic structure in the Ethiopia of today.

This article presented both the theoretical and practical case for aid to be a source for corruption and prolonging conflicts among warring nations. I examined documents and the information obtained from various credible voices already aired by ex-TPLF veterans. I cross-examined previous testimonies provided by high level donor aid officials and aid agencies’ personnel who were deeply involved in the delivery of humanitarian aid at the time. I also sought out and investigated documents written by journalists who happen to report the extent of donor aid flow and to whom they were given. This led me to uncover one of the hard to find non-classified CIA documents, thanks to Google’s search engine, which in turn reinforced the claims made by donor aid officials and aid agency personnel who attested that humanitarian aid was indeed siphoned off to military uses by the TPLF. The examination of the facts also indicates that both donor nations and aid agencies took a blind eye to the misuse and diversion of humanitarian aid to military uses. Some say this is mainly due to the fact that the channeling of humanitarian assistance along the Ethio-Sudanese border in the 1980s was partly political (see, [Evil Days](#), pp. 356-62, for example).

The cross-examination of the documents we gathered along with the testimonials of individuals also indicates that the TPLF skillfully captured humanitarian aid resources, with all of its full intent. The desire to capture and use humanitarian aid resources motivated the Front to (in large part forcefully) parade already weakened peasants to trek to Sudan, which led to the death of tens of thousands of them and to their increased suffering. This article has also presented the case in which the provision of humanitarian aid could have the opposite and damaging (largely unintended) effects on the recipient country and its people using Ethiopia as an example. To the extent that the desire to access humanitarian aid resources lured organized groups such as the TPLF to commit crimes against humanity, and to the extent that these same resources have benefitted the elites and have enabled the TPLF establish a highly corruptive and oligarchic system that we observe in today's Ethiopia, we conclude that humanitarian aid resources were the basis for the onset of state capture that reigns supreme currently in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian experience is another proof to the contention that emergency humanitarian assistance mutates to full-fledged industry involving a multitude of actors, each with its own questionable motives. According to [Poole](#) (2010), in 2008, nearly three-quarters of humanitarian assistance emanating from 23 DAC donors went to conflict or emerging from conflict states. However, there has been a significant growth in the flow to these same countries "despite a reduction in the overall number of active conflicts" and despite the fact that humanitarian aid has been known to have offered "immense opportunities for major corruption." As Terry (1996:136) noted, aid agencies do not have the proclivity to report about their failures or the negative impacts of their actions or their aid having unintended effect on the aid recipients. They only report their achievements and successes fearing that the people giving the aid would refuse to do so, should there is a "slightest suggestion that their money is not having the intended effects." Even though there is altruism behind the passionate-filled advocacy and campaign and their remarkably successful marketing and lobbying tactics on the part of international aid agencies, as [Clifford Bob](#) clearly articulated it long ago, aid agencies themselves are influence peddlers whose livelihoods depends on their own abilities to market morality. Let's look the hypocrisy of aid agencies this way using the country for this case study-Ethiopia: Some of these same aid agencies in the 1980s had correctly told us that a good deal of the root causes of famine and poverty in the country were man-made: bad governance resulting in conflicts, instability, restrictions on trade, damaged markets, forced relocation of peasants and bad land tenure policies, for example. With the exception of humanitarian agencies such as HRW and perhaps Doctors without Borders, aid agencies never talk about bad governance playing a big role for Ethiopia's food insecurity problems. Part of the reason behind this is because bad governance creates fertile grounds for the aid charity industry to thrive. Neither do they talk about the deleterious consequences of dolling out charity since charitable intervention is sacrosanct from their standpoint.¹⁸

If donors and aid agencies had thought their aid would alleviate the suffering of poor Ethiopian peasants, elite capture has thwarted their intentions, further playing a role in disarming the hunger stricken peasants while at the same time heavily empowering the elite. As HRW, Tanguy, Epstein (op. cit.) and many others suggest, aid has increased the political allegiances of the recipients to the TPLF/EPRDF cadres and the political elite, to the extent that the pain

¹⁸ Two authors are worth mentioning here. One is the former World Bank economist and development expert, Paul Collier. In his book entitled as [The Bottom Billion](#) (2007:4), Collier says there are 4 traps which keep the poorest 50 countries in the world to be poorer: conflicts, natural resources, bad governance and being landlocked with bad neighbors. Collier identifies NGOs and celebrities as being obstacles to the eradication and alleviation of poverty because all they do is glamorize aid give simple solutions for a complex problem. The second is Peter Gill. In his book entitled as [Famine and Foreigners: Ethiopia Since Live Aid](#) (2010). Gill says the Ethiopian world has not changed after 25 years of Live Aid and Live8 and despite the fact that the country has been an experimental hub for donors and aid agencies because, among other things, Ethiopian continues to be ruled by autocratic regimes and the complicit in their activities of foreigners who supporting them.

inflicted by donor aid being perceived by a significant portion of Ethiopians to be larger than the pain alleviated. To the extent that humanitarian has enriched the political elite but also burdened the recipients, to the extent that aid fuelled conflicts and incentivized corruption, to the extent that humanitarian aid begat millionaires at the expense of human lives, and to the extent that aid has led to the establishment of EFFORT-a suffocating oligarchic system in Ethiopia¹⁹, the aid agencies and donor countries cannot escape culpability. It is for these reasons why one can reasonably conclude that humanitarian aid was and still is in large part a curse rather than a blessing for Ethiopia.

¹⁹ EFFORT is the “[the biggest conglomerate in the entire continent of Africa](#)”, according to Mr. Sibhat Nega, one of the powerbrokers and founders of the TPLF.

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