

SOMALIA: A TRAGEDY BEYOND CAMBODIA'S

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*Death may be very gentle after all:
He turns his face away from arrogant knights
Who fling themselves against him in their fights;
But to the loveliest he loves to call.
And he has with him those whose ways were mild
And beautiful; and many a little child.*

—Oliver St. John Gogarty

The Call of Death is common today along the Ogaden Somalia border, and it is the children who are summoned most often — the innocent young who bear the overwhelming burden of poverty, illness and the violence of war in the largest refugee population in the world today.

There are now more refugees in Africa than in Southeast Asia, according to the United States High Commissioner for Refugees. And in Somalia, there are more refugees than in all the Cambodian and Vietnamese camps combined, though few in our nation are even aware of the problem. Africa, in fact, is being penalized for generously accepting refugees; whereas the obscene practice of expelling refugees in Southeast Asia brings the matter to America's attention and touches our hearts.

The amount of American aid committed to alleviate the current tragedy of Cambodian refugees is many times greater than that even being considered by our government for all of Africa. Possibly the plight of the desperate dying children of Somalia does not touch the complex guilt feelings of America regarding Cambodia and Vietnam, but the Somali child is dying just as rapidly and with the same permanence. To complicate matters even

more, the 1980 budget of UNHCR allocates almost three times more funds to Southeast Asia than it does for Africa. To use a diplomatic euphemism, the response of both the United States and the UN refugee organization is "restrained."

For the past 15 years I have worked annually among the Somalis, trekking with the nomads for weeks on end while tracing their diseases. They are a tough, proud people who eke out an existence herding camels and goats over a lunarlike landscape. Survival in such an area, where daily temperatures frequently reach 100 degrees and life is an endless search for water, has earned the Somalis the designation as the "Irish of Africa." They have learned to endure drought and to expect periodic famine. The loyalty of the clan usually sustains the needy, and an intense national pride prevents them from easily seeking or readily accepting outside assistance.

Four years ago, when the great Sahelian drought moved eastward and enveloped Somalia, I also worked in their relief camps. At that time, nomadic families were recycled for settlement on arable land or along the vast Horn of Africa's Indian Ocean coastline and transformed into farmers and fishermen. Today Somalia is in the throes of a far greater crisis, caught up in a refugee problem without parallel in modern times.

Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees have been turned away at gunpoint from neighboring shores or forced back across borders to certain death. By contrast, Somalia has quietly and steadily accepted the refugees of the Ogaden, for the majority are ethnic brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, this admirable and fraternal national feeling is rapidly reaching the breaking point, for there are now over one million refugees in a total population of five million. Furthermore, women and children account for 90% of the refugees in the camps.

The men in these families are gone, some have been killed in the sputtering Ogaden war, many in bombing and strafing raids that have characterized Cuba's and Russia's contribution to the overt Ethiopian effort at permanently depopulating the contested area other men continue to fight in one of the Somali Liberation Front units, while a few remain in the bush with their dying livestock.

In mid-1978 there were 88,000 refugees in Somali camps, but by mid-1979 the number had risen to

220,000. In the past three months the flight has become a flood tide, with over 1,000 new refugees arriving daily, most in far worse physical condition than those who elected to return to Somalia in 1978. There are now over 360,000 refugees in makeshift camps, and American refugee experts in Africa forecast that a million homeless will be in Somali camps within the year.

I have made medical rounds in the emergency camps in the past week in most, a single young Somali doctor strives to serve up to 50,000 sick, frightened, homeless people. He works with almost no laboratory or surgical equipment, few nurses and grossly inadequate drugs and medical supplies in one of the five transit and 21 permanent camps. The huts, constructed from mud and thatch, are infested with disease carrying insects. There are no latrines in any of the camps that I visited, and the only water comes from nearly parched beds of neighboring rivers or stagnant pools that serve the animals as well as the humans.

I have visited the transit camps near the border, where new arrivals are received and three of the large "permanent" settlements where survivors toil at modest farming projects — growing corn and papayas, I have revisited hospitals in Mogadiscio and Hargeisa to see the meager health service of Somalia begin to collapse under the new pressures.

Infectious diseases — malaria, tuberculosis, hepatitis, dysentery, bronchitis — are rife and the potential for truly decimating epidemics of cholera, for example, is frighteningly predictable. The death rate is astronomic; in one camp of 41,000 women and children, there had been 2,000 deaths in the last

two weeks, with 41 pregnant women having died from dysentery during the week I visited the camp. Contrast that with New York State, where all last year only 28 pregnant women died from any cause, and only one was due to an infection, following an abortion.

Even as I write this article, I cannot eradicate the image and smell of a bullet-shattered limb on a woman who had to be carried by camel over 70 miles to the safety of the border before any medical attention could be provided; I cannot forget the vacant stare and bloated bellies of babies — by the dozen — dying from starvation.

Today Africa looks to America to acknowledge its brotherhood with the vast horde of homeless, displaced persons who have no hold on our conscience — as do the Vietnamese and Cambodians — except for the overriding fact that they are human and starving. Is it too much to hope, for example, that at least the Black Caucus in Congress might agitate for a greater awareness of the problems of Africa? Is it not right to ask that the media help to educate the American public by stressing the scope of the Somali disaster rather than focusing solely on the refugee problem in Southeast Asia? Time is rapidly running out on Somalia, and since that nation can no longer cope alone with the largest refugee population in the world today, the spector of massive famine and death haunts all of us in the human family.

Dr. Cahill is a New York physician who has recently returned from a trip to Somalia.