

The Ethiopian Calamity

THE attractions of Ethiopia to the tourist are substantial. Daily flights from Europe to Addis Ababa make it an easily accessible country. The last leg of the journey is from Asmara, in Eritrea, to Addis. Beneath this spectacular flight lie the Ethiopian highlands and the extraordinary churches at Lalibela, hewn directly out of the rock. Beneath the flight path and to the east of it, also lie tens of thousands of dead, in regions now gripped by as bad a famine as relief workers have ever encountered.

The region worst affected lies between Makale in Tigre and Dessie in Wallo. In this area there is one rainy period a year, from June until early September; this is the summer monsoon season. As Winstanley pointed out in *Nature* (245, 190; 1973), mean summer rainfall has recently declined from 165 to 100 mm per year for a set of stations across the Southern Sahara to Khartoum. It is this rainfall which makes much of the middle levels (up to 1,500 m) of Ethiopia suitable for cultivation and grazing, and it is its failure that has led to the famine.

In 1972, crops such as millet, maize and sorghum could not be planted. Thus by September 1972 the tragedy had begun. Between then and May 1973, 80% of the cattle were lost and there were smaller losses of camels. In May, the international organisations working in Ethiopia switched their efforts from development to relief and a plea went to the UN World Food Programme for assistance. Aid did not materialise from this source for several months and meanwhile the Ethiopian government, with organisations such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, were trying to cope in a region in which adequate roads were practically non-existent. For several months, however, the world at large was allowed to know nothing as the government kept a very low profile. Meanwhile the Sahelian countries were forthcoming about their similar troubles and received early aid. This cover-up persisted until Ethiopian students in Addis heard of the disaster and approached Mr Jonathan Dimbleby. The result was the powerful film shown on Thames Television two weeks ago. Mr Dimbleby has since broadcast an appeal for financial support for a relief programme which seems destined to continue for at least a year. And still the full extent of the famine is unknown, because Tigre province includes inaccessible villages in which it is feared more may have died.

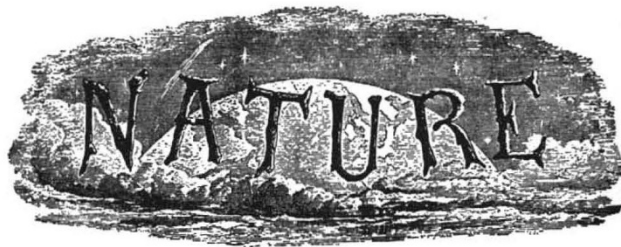
What can be done about this terrible disaster? There is, of course, a continuing need for money to support the concerted actions of the voluntary organisations. There is also a need for technical, particularly medical, personnel to do a short tour of duty in the area. There are, however, many broader issues to face. This catastrophe had been foreseeable since September 1972 and yet nothing was done when there was still time. Further, the severe drought conditions south of the Sahara this year did not seem to alert anyone to the possibility that Ethiopia was having similar problems. One cannot be sure, even now, that all affected regions have been identified—is southern

Sudan free of trouble, for instance? The situation in Ethiopia here and now could have been surmised both by earlier observations in Ethiopia and present observations elsewhere. There is even a large American military communications facility within 150 miles of the region. Yet it needed a television programme to alert the outside world.

No doubt there will be proposals for more technology to improve our understanding of climate, more satellites to keep watch, more equipment in the field, better drought-resistant plants. One cannot but hope that science will provide some future comfort. The central issue, however, has no technological solution; it is a social and political problem and is seen in a most exposed form in Ethiopia. It springs from pride in external relationships and a lack of understanding in internal ones. The ruling race are the Shoans, highlanders centred on Addis, and even a sympathetic observer describes them as "proud, aloof, self-sufficient". It is unlikely that they understand the ways of the herdsmen and farmers in Wallo and Tigre. They certainly know little of the character of the nomadic Danakil people. The present situation finds the central government ill-prepared mentally, however much aid they may distribute. Worse, there has clearly been a great unwillingness to allow external publicity and this can only be attributed to misplaced pride and a fear of loss of tourist income.

It is obvious that as long as governments all over the world are too proud to think beyond national solutions to human problems, and relief agencies are hamstrung by political sensitivities, such tragedies will occur with regularity.

100 Years Ago



THE following awards have been made by the French Geographical Society:—2,000 francs to M. Dournaux-Dupéré, who has just set out for Timbuctoo; this gentleman has also received a similar sum from the Minister of Public Instruction; 2,000 fr. to M. Francis Garnier, to aid him in his explorations along the Blue River in China, and which have Yun-nan and Tibet for their objects; 1,500 fr. to MM. Marche and Compiègne, who have already proceeded a considerable distance along the course of the Ogowe with the design of penetrating as far as the great African lakes, and joining Livingstone.

From *Nature*, 9, 33, November 13, 1873.