

Famine in Niger

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Bob Geldof said just before the G8 issued their final statement on debt forgiveness for 14 African countries:

"Tomorrow 280 million Africans will wake up for the first time in their lives without owing you or me a penny . . ."

Apart from the unctuous untruth that Africans actually owe you or me anything, they might prefer to wake up knowing they could expect a meal that day. In Niger millions will wake up knowing that is unlikely in the extreme. The sudden eruption onto the news of a ferocious famine in the west African state has exposed the cruel hoax that eight men could make poverty history."

Niger is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. It holds the second highest under-five mortality rate in the world with one in five children dying before their fifth birthday. Every year 166,000 children in Niger die from preventable diseases and almost 70 percent of the country's 12 million people do not have access to health services.

Up to a quarter of Niger's 12m people are now facing famine. Aid agencies estimate that tens of thousands of children are in the advanced stages of starvation. 150,000 children could soon die unless help comes soon.

Yet this is no sudden or unexpected catastrophe. NGOs and the United Nations have been ringing the alarm bells about Niger for nearly a year now. In August 2004 the near failure of the rains to materialise was followed in October by plagues of locusts. This is related to the extreme trend to desertification in West Africa that climatologists have been warning about as related to human-induced climate change. Another burning issue the G8 refused to do anything concrete about.

In November the United Nations appealed for aid for Niger but received hardly any pledges from the rich countries. By January signs of acute hunger were unmistakable.

In May 2005 the United Nations once more appealed for \$16m of food aid. A month later not even a single pledge had been received. By July desperate people were fleeing across the border into Nigeria in search of food. Demonstrators were demanding free food distribution from dwindling government stocks, in vain.

As the news of the famine gets through to ordinary people private donations will doubtlessly come in via the NGOs but too late to save many children. No doubt too the pledges will soon be made by those western governments who were warned about the impending famine nine months ago and more. But as was proved by the tsunami appeal, a pledge is not a payment.

"Make Poverty History"? What cynicism. The immeasurably rich western ruling classes will not even make starvation history. They could do so with a tiny fraction of their defence budgets. But they are too busy attaching pro-privatisation strings to their debt relief programme. John Pilger reports that for every \$1 of

?aid? to Africa, \$3 are taken out by western banks, institutions and governments, and that does not include the repatriated profit of transnational corporations.? So ?Western Aid? is not the answer.

The rank and file demonstrators in Edinburgh and Gleneagles need to get on the streets again, not pleading but threatening. They need to demand that the debt to the international financial agencies and the private banks be cancelled without strings. They should demand not aid, not trade but unconditional reparations from the multinationals for centuries of plundering Africa of its gold, its oil, its people.

Get the western corporations hands off the resources of the continent. But also get the hands of the continent?s workers onto the factories, mines and fields they toil in. Get rid of the corrupt rulers- corrupted by Western governments and corporations. How to do this? By a revolution of the workers and peasants of the continent, supported by the workers of the world.

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