

## **Whose concern are the poor and hungry of African continent?**

### **A PAN-AFRICANIST VIEW by Dr Tajudeen, Justice Africa**

THE Band Aid album, Do They Know It's Christmas Time?, which sold millions of copies and raised millions more dollars directly for famine in Ethiopia 20 years ago is being released again in time for this Christmas. As in 1984, it is predicted that the album will be a runaway success in the Christmas charts.

Apart from the millions of dollars raised then and to be raised now what both the album and the Live Aid concert it inspired in July 1985 (which was watched reportedly by Over 1.5 billion people across the world) achieved was to raise awareness about hunger, starvation and famine in Africa.

The bloated tummies of underfed babies clutching at emaciated breasts of a hunger-ravished mother or the flies holidaying in huge numbers on the mouths and bodies of desperate children, women and men in refugee camps became the dominant image of Africa. It was successful in causing almost a stampede of humanitarian concern and interest in Africa.

However, it had its own unintended consequences then and twenty years on these negative consequences have greater impact.

The fact that the same song could be re released without altering the lyrics (but different musicians) at all and with similar accompanying horrible pictures on televisions, in newspapers and other more widely accessible multi media today than then speak volumes.

I am particularly irked about that dubious line: "Thank God, tonight it's them instead of you"! The only variation on the theme is that instead of targeting Ethiopia last time around, it is Sudan that is competing for the sympathy of the West as Africa's most hellish of hells! It is an indictment of first, Africa's leaders and also other members of the international community that despite all the awareness and pangs of conscience in the last 20 years those human beings can still be facing such penury, humiliation and starvation. We can criticise the deliberate use of those horrible images that strip us of our dignity and humanity but must be outraged that Africans have been largely responsible for such continuous misery inflicted on our own peoples.

Band Aid, Live Aid or any of the busy body Western NGOs rising huge sums of money on these images did not create them, they are merely exploiting them for their own humanitarian business. So the first responsibility is ours and ours alone, to stop brutalizing and pauperizing our own people.

But the humanitarian agencies also have to ask themselves whether their chosen methods have worked.

They often defend the use of the bad images as necessary to raise awareness and prick the conscience of the world (most of the time they mean, Europeans and Americans!). One is bound to ask of Live Aid and Band Aid then what the harvest of this conscience safari has been if they have to use the same images and record two

decades later.

It has always intrigued me why the conscience of the West can only be pricked by degradation of other peoples.

The process of getting westerners to part with their donations end up dehumanizing and degrading Africa. Instead of creating the much needed understanding and solidarity it creates an unequal power relations with psychological hang-ups about superior and inferior peoples, one a permanent donor and the other is a permanent supplicant.

That one-way street does not lead to understanding. Rather it institutionalises a we-know-best attitude on the part of the humanitarian industry. It also makes the humanitarian agencies to be married to bad news from Africa, thereby becoming merchants of our misery.

The worse the situation, the better for their fund-raising drives! This breeds cynicism among those who are supposed to be grateful for the kind help they are receiving.

The more important lesson of the 20 years of Band Aid must surely be bringing into sharp relief the naivety of those years that symbolic acts of genuine human solidarity will somehow change the hearts and minds of the powerful both in Africa and outside. They can throw a few coins at the problem to appease immediate pressure and gain public mileage.

But the real change will only come from raising the power questions that turn drought into famine. It is politics and power that makes Africans seemingly more vulnerable than other peoples to hunger and starvation.

Africa is not a poor continent, but our peoples are poor because they are powerless over their resources. People are powerless in their countries and our countries are impotent in global power relations.

Charity may offer an instant fire brigade service but it cannot be a substitute for sustainable long-term solution. Why is it that Ethiopia that received massive humanitarian support 20 years ago is today one of the least recipient of long-term development Aid in Africa?

Even if it gets more help in Aid, as long as it continues to get bad terms of trade and returns for its coffee and other raw materials it, like other African countries it will continue to run deficit economies needing Aid.

They have become Aid addicts while the humanitarian interventionists and NGOs have become Aid pushers.

I think Saint Bob and Bono in the past few years have come to realise this and that's why they are talking less about charity but more upfront on terms of trade, equity, global justice, debt cancellation, etc.

This shift is necessary in order to build a global alliance (rather than Western do-gooders and their selective conscience) that can truly make poverty history in this new millennium.

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