The Struggle to Survive

Drought afflicts 21 countries; millions despare of food

By Josh Friedman

Nothing that happened to Job in the Bible matches what is happening to the more than 400 million Africans who live south of the Sahara desert.

For one dazzling moment in the past two decades, they had known hope as one after another of their countries became independent. But hope was dashed, first by man-made calamities — and now by nature, itself.

The world's economy veered crazily from inflation to recession. African countries and their wealthy supporters mishandled agricultural development. The prices of their cash crops plunged on the world market. Energy prices shot up with the price of oil, stalling development in all but the lucky few African countries with their own oil reserves.

Then, it stopped raining.

In east Africa and in the area of west Africa called the Sahel, the fringe of countries along the base of the Sahara, normal rains have never returned since the last great drought of 1975. In which more than half a million people died. In southern Africa, a good portion of the last three years has been bone dry — converting a grain-exporting region into one dependent on international food aid.

A Newsday team of two reporters and a photographer has just completed a two-month tour of Africa to examine the crucial side of this continent-wide drought — its impact on the people. The Itinerary included Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in west Africa to Ethiopia and Kenya in east Africa and Zimbabwe in southern Africa. South Africa, also hard hit by drought, refused to grant Newsday visas.

The tour confirmed the fears of most officials confronting the drought: Things are getting worse.

By the end of this year, the death toll probably will have reached 1 million people in Ethiopia alone. More than 5 million people are fleeing across the continent as refugees. Twenty-one African nations are now affected by drought, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). More than 6 million tons of food aid is needed next year to keep between 30 million and 40 million people from extreme hunger — possibly death. That amount would require donor nations to provide 40 percent more aid than they gave this year, the FAO says.

"People are in many countries in Africa are worse off now than they were at the beginning of the year and their prospects for the future are dimmer," says UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar.

"Overall the situation has deteriorated sharply," FAO director general Edouard Sacouma said last week of next year's food prospects.

According to most sources, at least eight African nations are the most critically affected by drought:

- Ethiopia — Widely thought to be the worst-off in Africa, between 6 million and 8 million of its people face starvation. Most of them live at high altitudes on arid land that is overused and eroded. Twelve of Ethiopia's 14 provinces are afflicted by drought. Despite western aid, which began accelerating in October when the Marxist government finally allowed western journalists access to the countryside, the death toll is already astronomical.

One British organization estimates almost 1 million will have died this year. Western governments believe the need for food aid in 1985 is as high as 1.3 million tons. According to U.S.

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This is another in a continuing series of reports on the drought and famine in Ethiopia and other nations of Africa. Tomorrow, Newsday's report will focus on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.
Millions Struggle to Survive

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...is eager to return to the Bush. He is not an African, but he is a bushman. He is not a farmer, but he is a hunter. He is not a herder, but he is a herdsman. He is not a trader, but he is a merchant. He is not a fisherman, but he is a sailor.

Western nations, the Soviet bloc and African nations often blame each other for the famine. According to some African officials, wealthy countries neglect development investment and show up with emergency shipments too late. An early alert forecasting the current drought was issued in the fall of 1985, and was largely ignored. In the spring of 1986, the UN called for an emergency relief campaign to 27 countries, but it was only after a famine alert was issued that the international community responded. The famine alert was issued on a monthly basis, but it was only after a famine alert was issued that the international community responded.

Many western officials say donor nations are being generous to a fault. This was shown vividly recently when Ethiopian relief officials criticized the United States for giving too little, too late. U.S. officials snapped back that it was a classic case of "biting the hand that feedeth thee.

"Africans can count on the United States," says Ambassador Alan L. Kaye, U.S. representative to the UN Economic and Social Council. "We will continue to be generous in our aid and prompt in the delivery of what is required to save lives."

The weight of the world's food stock falls on the United States, which is the largest donor of food aid. More than half the world's food aid comes from the United States. The United States has pledged or delivered more than half of a billion dollars worth of food aid and millions of tons of food to sub-Saharan Africa in the fiscal year that started last October. About 500,000 tons of food is in emergency storage and the amount of food aid will increase as the year goes on. It seems a lot. But the United States is the largest donor of food aid to the world, which is why the United States needs to continue to provide food aid to Africa.

Involvement in Africa has become de rigueur for not-for-profit agencies active in international aid. This trend is not new. But as western aid accelerates sharply, it is also where the money and action are.

For years, Catholic Relief Services has been the largest donor of food aid in Africa. But now, U.S. Agency for International Development director Peter McPherson is paying closer attention to Africa. A new focus on Africa will give relief agencies more flexibility in the way they use their money. In fact, relief agencies are now helping to raise money for their own operations by distributing food aid to underdeveloped countries in Africa.

Relief agencies are racing to raise American donations and help African nations in their efforts to feed themselves. But there is a growing consensus that emergency food aid is not sufficient. The approach to famine relief must be comprehensive and include programs to improve agriculture, health care and education. The United States, which is the largest donor of food aid in Africa, must continue to provide food aid to Africa. But we must also work to prevent future famines by improving agriculture and education in Africa.