

Guest editorial

Ubuntu and the crisis in Somalia

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The African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu is rooted in the concept of community. As Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu deftly explains, 'Ubuntu is not "I think therefore I am."' It says rather: "I am a human because I belong. I participate. I share. In essence, I am because you are.'" Ubuntu, therefore, in essence is diametrically opposed to individualism, and embraces the fact that human beings cannot exist in isolation, but are somehow interconnected to each other.

Disasters like the tsunami in Indonesia, the earthquake in Haiti, the flood in Pakistan, and Hurricane Katrina have claimed the lives of millions in many parts of the world. In addition, we are confronted with global economic turmoil following the downtrend of the US market, making it more difficult for governments around the world to find the necessary surplus resources to avert humanitarian crises in disaster-stricken areas. Highlighting the consequences of drought and famine in Somalia, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Ban Ki-moon, is reported to have said that nearly half of Somalia's population (i.e. 3.7 million people) was in crisis and that a total of \$1.6 billion was needed in order to alleviate their plight. However, the volatile political situation in Somalia is an impediment to emergency relief aid. It was only last year, when the drought was looming, that Western aid organisations were forced out of the country when their workers were killed. Many aid organisations are now reluctant to return. This is precisely why the UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, sought security guarantees from the rebel group so that the much needed aid supplies could be delivered to the starving Somalis. The most affected areas of Somalia are in the south. According to the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), the crisis in Somalia represents the most serious food insecurity situation in the world today, in terms of both scale and severity.

Caught between conflict and famine, tens of thousands of Somalis have been forced to flee to Mogadishu, the Somali capital, thereby exacerbating the living conditions as well as the health and sanitary conditions in the makeshift camps that have been set up for the refugees. TV footage and newspaper coverage

of emaciated children bring tears to our eyes. Many of these children who find their way to these camps are suffering from severe malnutrition, dehydration, diarrhoea, pneumonia and kwashiorkor, the latter being an acute form of vitamin deficiency that mainly affects children.

Paradoxically, the famine that is plaguing the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa coincides with the commencement of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, when Muslims are obliged to fast from dawn to sunset. This month-long exercise in abstention from food, drink and sex is meant to equip Muslims to exercise self-control over the instincts of their baser selves so that they may grow spiritually and, concomitantly, identify themselves with those who are living in extremis and cannot have a square meal a day. The Somalis are Muslims, and are starving, but it is reported that many of those who present themselves at the feeding camps still choose not to eat and drink until it is time for them to break their fast.

While consignments of food are trickling into Somalia from around the world, a South African humanitarian aid organisation has embraced the spirit of *Ubuntu* and mobilised the South African public to open their hearts and contribute generously in order to alleviate the sufferings of their fellow brothers and sisters. Four planeloads, carrying tons of food, medical supplies and a team of medical specialists, have already been sent to Mogadishu, spearheading an African response to an African problem. However, the humanitarian crisis in Somalia needs to be perceived as a catastrophe that warrants global intervention in order to alleviate the sufferings of our fellow human beings. The absence of a strategic global emergency aid programme reflects only limited *Ubuntu*, and the looming global economic turmoil means that people will continue to die.

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