

Viewpoints, Outlook

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Face of Ethiopia is uglier than one seen by Houston

Government's PR machine hides many brutal truths

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The Houston International Festival and the Lucy exhibition at the Museum of Natural Science highlight the positive aspects of the African nation of Ethiopia. Knowingly or not, however, both iFest and the museum have been complicit with the government of Ethiopia in shunning a large segment of the Ethiopian population in Houston.

The concerns of Ethiopians in diaspora and at home have been marginalized by the PR machine of the regime in Addis Ababa, which denies the existence of human rights violations and record famine.

While the Ethiopian government is spending millions in lobbying, American tax dollars are being used to prop up the regime and to ship weapons. At the same time, almost a quarter of the Ethiopian population is facing starvation. The United States is about to send more grain, but not as much as it once did.

The Ethiopian government response to the recent rise in commodity prices was to use merchants and farmers as scapegoats. But the primary culprit for perennial food deficit and famine in that country is flawed economic policies and abuse of human rights. A dictatorship with no free media and which is not accountable to its people has all the means at hand to use any excuse for its failure. It has taken extraordinary measures to arrest and punish many traders and farmers for rising prices.

Rural poverty and starvation in Ethiopia are directly related to land ownership. The country has a vastly superior land mass, great potential and rainfall not only to feed itself, but also to help feed the rest of Africa. Indeed, it was once referred to as the breadbasket of Africa because of its climate, fertile soil and location.

Unfortunately, that natural endowment has not been used to advantage and has even been thwarted by successive regimes' desire to own and control land.

The country's agonizing economic and political conditions are a direct result of government policy. Many starving countries blame weather for their troubles. But the primary reason for famine and starvation in Ethiopia is not the vagaries of nature, greedy merchants or farmers; rather, it is the unsustainable and poor stewardship of economic policy by the state — including faulty land ownership policies, the lack of a free market and good governance, and failure to decentralize and establish clearly defined property rights.

Bondage to communism in Ethiopia is a huge roadblock to economic development. It has failed to allow and promote incentives for market-based institutions to allocate resources in a more efficient and sustainable fashion.

Appropriate policies and use of technologies stemmed the tide of famine in the 1960s in India and Pakistan, and made less endowed countries like Israel exporters of a variety of food products. In Ethiopia, however, the government owns 100 percent of the land, and the citizens are hostage to the party bosses, who have the right to evict, confiscate and threaten any property owner with any punishment.

In Ethiopia, as in North Korea, citizens have no rights to sell or borrow against their own land because they have no title to it. The farmers, consequently, have no incentives to preserve the soil and to introduce more innovative ways to improve their farming techniques. Their incentive to produce more is also constrained by government control of their market through government boards that collect grains from the rural areas and sell it to urban dwellers, sometimes at exorbitant prices.

Despite these facts, Ethiopia's government-controlled media have portrayed farmers and merchants as scapegoats for the recent price rises in order to assuage consumers and assign blame.

The other underpinning for the rising poverty in Ethiopia is lack of access to technology. The Ethiopian regime controls the Internet, cell phone, telephone and other major tools of communication and economic development inside the country, which makes it easy to watch and control the country's 80 million primarily poverty-stricken people.

Ethiopia's biblical suffering will continue unless there is a dramatic shift in current U.S. policy. Bluntly speaking, United States should review its policy toward Ethiopia.

Continuing present policies will only embol-

den the Ethiopian regime to continue along its disastrous path. Ethiopia will degenerate into a failed state like Somalia, if not worse.

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