

## How Many Bob Geldofs Does It Take to Convince the BBC?

### A Not On Official Response

*Genenew Assefa Aug 23, 2011*

Renowned as he is for his humorous but insightful one-liners, Winston Churchill once amused his American audience by yet another of his witty remarks that the Yanks and Brits are one people but divided by language. One wonders what quip he might have used were he to witness that more than language separates the US government and the British media where Ethiopia is concerned. A quick comparison of Hillary Clinton's speech on the current drought in the Horn of Africa, and the BBC's contrary take on the matter underscores this point. We are, of course, referring here to the BBC 2 documentary aired on August 4 by Nightnews. A documentary that came with the lure of a forbidden apple, as it is advertised to have been secretly compiled deep inside Ethiopia below the radar of official oversight.

Understandably the Ethiopian government was scandalized by such an underhanded breach of trust. Without delay it let its displeasure known through a strongly-worded letter of protest addressed to the BBC Board of Trustees. Among other justifiable complaints, which we shall sparingly rehearse below, the letter said, *"We are utterly appalled by the reporters' unabashed admission of secretly entering our country---- not least because no reporter has any reason to sneak into Ethiopia as the country is open to foreign journalists."* Let alone Ethiopia, a country where access to information is a legally protected right, any half-tolerant state would take exception to being treated like North Korea or Eritrea where journalist are banned for life. Indeed sneaking into the country under condition of secrecy speaks more about the ethical standards of the BBC

than the media unfriendliness of the Ethiopian state. Not least because Ethiopia is by all accounts the hub of African diplomacy where countless foreign reporters freely roam in and out of every part of the country. And cover any event as they do the seemingly endless series of international conferences, summits, seminars and workshops.

One, therefore, can't help wonder if personal motive (fame and glory) might not have been involved in the BBC's surreptitious undertaking. After all, what reporter wouldn't want to acquire celebrity status that Jonathan Dimbleby enjoys at present largely for his documentary on the 1974 Ethiopia famine? Granted, as in many parts of the Horn of Africa, there are drought-affected areas in Ethiopia where close to five million people are presently receiving urgent relief. But, though the current spell is the worst in history, no relief worker or reporter has seen firsthand a single famine-related death in Ethiopia. Given, therefore, that there is no 'hidden starvation' in this country, Nightnews' pretentious claim to have secretly uncovered a concealed human tragedy is, to quote the government, *'unbecoming of a prestigious media.'* Even more incredulous is that Nightnews claims to have found evidence of relief being conditioned on the voting record of drought victims. In other words, according to this documentary, only those districts which voted for the incumbent are slated for food assistance. The audacity of this allegation is arresting, to say the least. Indeed it is mindboggling given that it is the ruling party which carried the 2010 election in every one of these presently drought-stricken districts. Surely it takes a leap of faith to believe that these same people in the area are today being punished for their political preference during the 2005 ballot, almost eight years later. Why would a ruling party punish an electorate that rallied behind it in the last 2010 election only because it voted differently in 2005? Does this make any political sense? If so, we should have at least heard similar rumors of government vindictiveness against huge electoral districts, say, for instance, in

Amhara Regional state, not to mention Addis Abba, which voted opposition more than half a decade ago.

Nightnews' convoluted logic aside, there is no political or any conceivable reason why the government has to discriminate against any community in its provisions of relief to the needy. Though it is beyond the comprehension of the BBC's reporter, if there is any politics involved here, it can only be the politics of preventing any draught-related death regardless of the victim's voting record. Indeed there is more point to be gained in avoiding a politically-induced starvation than whatever gain might be had from political vengeance against the vulnerable. Crass as this pattern of reporting is, what could be the driving rational? Well, from where we stand, it can only be motivated by a callous urge to bask in glory at the expense of those in dire need. A self-righteous act, we must add, laced with manifest intent to appear infinitely holier than the pop at the expense of the credibility of the federal government. The very government, whose preparedness against emergency food-shortage and rapid development policy is the only reason why drought has not, and will never, turn into famine in Ethiopia.

Nightnews does not stop here. In the introductory part of the so-called researched documentary, the narrator, much like a high-pressure salesman, tries to wet his viewers' appetite which his product does not deliver. In a somber tone of voice, he tells the audience that what they are about to see is irrefutable evidence of the consequences of government diversion of Western aid to Ethiopia. Nevertheless, in vain would one rerun as many times as one wants the BBC's documentary to find the said incriminating evidence. For simply because there is no such a policy in Ethiopia, let alone, of this magnitude of cruelty. What one might glean at best is perhaps vague inferences, which is open to multiple, even conflicting interpretations. No doubt we see the narrator conducting

interviews with drought victims, albeit with lead questions designed to solicit the kind of response which fits his script. But anyone who speaks even a smattering of Amharic is bound to immediately notice that none of those being interviewed are much of a help to the reporter on this score. To begin with, none of the interviewees seem to be aware that they were being shortchanged of Western funding, earmarked to meet their needs. Neither can one hear any one among them saying, in audible language at any rate, that they are being denied relief for voting against the ruling party.

Such shoddy journalism might not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with how Ethiopia is occasionally stereotyped in Western media. For the discerning, the Nightnews documentary can only be a replay of what had already been exposed for what it is – disinformation. A replica, if you will, of the outrageous 2008 BBC report where one fine morning fifteen years after the fact, Martin Plaut of the BBC claimed to have uncovered similar embezzlement of relief fund. Indeed, if it were on Mr. Plaut's report, the TPLF/EPRDF would have been guilty of siphoning Band Aid donation during the country's worst 1985 famine to date. However, there was a sad ironic twist to the story which nonetheless proved a blessing in disguise to Ethiopian officials. As it turned out, Sir Bob Geldof too was implicated in the BBC's fictitious indictment as he was the inspirational figure of Band Aid at the time. Obviously as a modern-day icon whose reputation was on the line, Geldof was not to silently bear this affront. Doubtless, the BBC could disregard Ethiopia's complaints. But not Bob Geldof's, whose public stature no media can ignore. Sure enough, the BBC was forced to conduct an investigation into the Plaut's accusatory report. Needless to say the finding exonerated both the Ethiopian ruling party and Band Aid of any of the widely circulated allegations of misconduct. Yet when the time came for apologies, the BBC could not bring itself to extend the curtesy to the Ethiopian

government. The party, in the words of the Ethiopian government, ‘which bore the brunt of the d by the BBC’s irresponsible report’

Indeed the aftereffects of the damage done to the Ethiopian government continue to be felt long after the BBC apologized to Sir Bob Geldof for falsely implicating him in what turned out to be a total hoax. It is this same allegation, then, which Nightnews rehashed in its documentary as if it is a new revelation. Nay, as if it is a spectacular discovery documented onsite by its daring reporters who, at great risk to their safety, secretly entered and exited a frighteningly closed country without being detected by what itself described as an omnipresent state security. This stunt might impress backwater viewers. But not the bulk of the English audience, who, we would like to believe, has learned a thing or two about hyped secret discoveries after the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ fiasco. In the same vein, we pray that eventually someone interested in the truth would question the BBC about the credibility of its secretly compiled report. Particularly, on its allegations of gross diversion of Western fund and mass starvation in Ethiopia. Surely if the BBC were to be grilled by an informed probe, it would have had no choice but to apologize, not of course, given its double standards, to Ethiopia. But, at least, to its English audience on whose tax it operates. At any rate, in the course of any probe regarding this matter, one thing would inevitably come out which the BBC must fear most. And that is, as recently as two years ago, a thorough, painstaking, and impartial investigation was made into allegations of misuse of Western aid by the Ethiopian government. What should compound the BBC’s worry is that this 2009 inquiry was conducted by a party with unlimited resources, with the most expertise, with the widest information access, and the highest stake in finding the truth about this accusation. Not least for the implication involved here goes beyond Ethiopia’s reputation and standing. We are of course referring to the Development Assistance Group- Ethiopia (DAG) in which England features

prominently. What other body could possibly have greater motive than DAG to probe into how its money is spent in Ethiopia?

DAG indeed launched perhaps the biggest investigation of its kind, in Africa at least, and went public with its findings. Nightnews apparently has vested interest in keeping its viewers in the dark about this fact. For obviously its abiding interest lies not in providing its audiences a balanced account that enables them to draw their own conclusion. But simply to marvel at the length Nightnews had to go to uncover a secret kept hidden by a shrewd despotic government which deprives its own people of Western donation. Nowhere is this brazen violation of the basic rules of journalism more blatant than the cast of political figures chosen to support the BBC's fabrication. Every single of these handpicked men are doubtless opposition party leaders: known mostly to say anything against the government, particularly to any white reporter, diplomat, investor, traveler, tourist, or passersby. One of them is in fact is presented as an internationally-respected human rights activist when every Ethiopian knows that he is a high-ranking senior member of a far-right opposition party. It is a small wonder, then, that no one who knows anything about the DAG investigation makes even a cameo appearance in Nightnews' docudrama. The reason is simple. Contrary to the BBC, the report which contains DAG's meticulously researched finding not only clears Ethiopia of any wrongdoing much less as gross an allegation as mass depravation of food aid. But also goes on to say.

*Ethiopia has made impressive development progress in recent years. Since 2000, Ethiopia has recorded the second fastest improvement in human development in the world. Economic growth has accelerated on a sustained basis from around 2003, despite the global economic crisis.... External aid has played a significant role in helping to deliver this development progress and growth, saving lives and improving livelihoods. These achievements are an*

*important measure by which donors assess the overall effectiveness of their support to Ethiopia.*

Well it could be argued that BBC may not be aware of this document. If so, though highly unlikely, the documentary should never have been advertised as best practice in investigative journalism. This brings us to the divergence of perspective between the US Secretary of State and Nightnews on how Ethiopia is coping with the current drought. With infinite country-specific data at her finger tips, Hilleary Clinton said the following about Ethiopia's performance.

*Two of our partner countries...are Ethiopia and Kenya. Even amid this crisis, they prove that progress is possible. The last time a drought of this magnitude of drought struck Ethiopia in 2002 and 2003 more than 13 million people faced starvation today fewer than 5 million do. Now that is an unacceptably large number but it is also an astonishing improvement in a relatively short period of time and it is evidence that investment in food security can pay off powerfully. In 2005 the Ethiopian government established the productive safety net program with support from international donors, including the United States. It helps small-holder farmers diversify their crops, creates local market, better manage their water resource and increase the nutritional content of their own diet and those of their children. More than 7.6 million farmers and herders are now helped by this program, people who are not among those in need of emergency aid today.*

Obviously had she raved in this manner about Ethiopia during her recent visit to Ethiopia, it would have been discounted as commonplace diplomatic nicety that foreign officials indulge a host country. What lends credence to Clintons' testimony, however, is that it was presented in the United States, and to an all-American audience at that. No doubt when a US official bears such a testimony, the message obviously carries more weight as it has positive policy implications. Nonetheless the substance of her appreciative reference to Ethiopia has been said several times before by no less, UN agencies, the World Bank and the MIF. A quick glance at any of the prestigious media websites on this matter, including

*The Economist* reveals that Ethiopia is by all measures one of the fastest growing countries in the world. In fact, thanks to its impressive social and basic infrastructural expansion, Ethiopia has scaled the United Nation's 2011 Human Development Index. None of this undeniable progress, however, is mentioned in the BBC's Nightnews. Again, the reason for Nightnews' silence on this success story is simple. For by no journalistic spin or camera trick can any slick reporter reconcile Ethiopia's development achievements with allegations of misuse of donor development aid. Indeed what country could reach where Ethiopia has if, as the BBC would have us believe, its government were using Western aid for political repression?

Once again the lack of balance in Nightnews' documentary comes out clearly. Recall, if you will, that there is no indication in the coverage that provides any clue about the glaringly visible development activities taking place all over this country. Naturally, one cannot expect any reference to Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plan in such kind of unabashedly biased documentary, bordering on cold-war propaganda. Yet any half-decent reporter would at least have said a word or two about the mass mobilization underway to meet the target set by Ethiopia's Transformation Plan. Among which includes scaling up agricultural production which one might have thought would have caught the BBC's interest. For the plan aims at nothing less than ending Ethiopia's dependency on food aid. Alas, when this country achieves this goal, as it will surely would in the not too distant future, fly-by-night Western reporters who thrive on human tragedy and disaster stories will stop coming to Ethiopia. For there will be no opportunity to make a quick name for themselves by producing sensationalized documentaries on famine and mass starvation.

While we are on the subject of sensationalism, let us conclude this commentary by briefly turning to the most outrageous of all the allegations made in the BBC

documentary under discussion. This is found in the part where we see the narrator in a Kenyan refugee camp, talking to Ethiopian-Somali women 'victims' of torture. Each of the women take turns, relating (through an unidentified translator) the horrendous abuse they claimed to have suffered at the hands of the Ethiopian army. One of the informants in fact claimed to have been pregnant when she was gang-raped while being tortured, resulting in the death of her unborn baby. Never mind that this is not a sworn testimony, what raises serious doubt about is the narrator's own concluding comment where he says 'we have no way of verifying these stories'. By any standards, it is strange that a journalist would make an inquiry into such -- by no means --- a light matter with no means of verifying the authenticity of his informant's story. To his credit, the narrator anticipates that this kind of question could be raised. Hence, he quickly tells us that the reason for the lack of a corroborating second source is because the Ethiopian government prevents journalists from entering the country. Then what? Are we to take the whole thing at face value? Well, since the BBC's prestige is at stake here, the narrator assures us that he and his crew would have to go underground and clandestinely enter Ethiopia to get to the bottom of the story. Sure enough, in the next scene we see the narrator, first somewhere in the Southern regional state of Ethiopia, and later in Addis Ababa; hundreds of miles away of the Somali Region where his informants claimed to have been raped and tortured. In both settings, however, the subject of the narrator's conversation with the local informants (our contact persons as he calls them) is not about rape and torture. But on diversion of Western fund and political repression we broached above.

What, then, is the sense of the audience going to be *vis-à-vis* BBC's allegation of rape and torture in the absence of a single supportive affidavit? We would sure like to believe that, at least English viewers would be guided here by the time-tested good old Anglo-Saxon legal principle: 'innocent until proven guilty.'

Whereas the more informed are more likely to credit Ethiopia's protest letter against BBC's irresponsible behavior. For, in all honesty, it is difficult for any informed British citizen to harmonize allegations of sadistic cruelty with the worldwide reputation of the Ethiopian army. In fact, even the least informed are bound to ask why the UN repeatedly calls on Ethiopia for difficult international peacekeeping missions. If, that is to say, the Ethiopian army is nothing but a collection of armed thugs who rape and torturer innocent women at will. Be that as it may, regardless of BBC's reputation, Nightnews has neither produced rational or empirical evidence to substantiate its libel against the Ethiopian Defense Forces. Nor could it ever in the future for the Ethiopian army has an impeccable record of discipline, professionalism, and proven commitment to safeguard the wellbeing and safety of any civilian population wherever it is commissioned.

Finally, it has to be asked, what can explain this BBC's uncharacteristic flop as far as investigative journalism goes. Well, as pointed out in the above cited letter of protest, the problems seems to lie in the brief. In other words, Nightnews fumbled because its research team was blinded by the background material they read in the lead-up to the onsite investigation. The most damaging is obviously the last discredited cut-and-pest Human Rights Watch Report on Ethiopia. If truth be told, the entire episode where the narrator talks with a feigned empathetic tone of voice about rape and torture is nothing but an audiovisual reenactment of Human Rights' fictitious report. It is the allegations contend in this report, which the Ethiopian government had already refuted, that the BBC set out to prove in the first place, rather than investigate the matter with no pre-conceived conclusion. No wonder, then the Ethiopian state characterized the Nightnews documentary as *"as an exercise ...intended to lend credence, with selected footages, to the last Human Right Watch Report, and thereby substantiate its warrantless conclusion."* Since it is difficult to improve on this

precise delineation of the scripted nature of the BBC's documentary, it is apt now to end our note here.

