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FIFA, Famine, Food and Forests



It is less than a week since the climax of the FIFA World Cup, when, for month, it appeared there was only one story in Africa to be reported on. Our household is uneven in its love of the game dedscribed by one writer as the provider of "the coinage on human discourse" across the whole of Africa.

Before the continent's biggest ever sports story began to unfold a friend, who knows a little of Africa, sent us a book, "Africa United – How football explains Africa". And in many ways it does, at least with numerous stories of joy and celebration, conflict and war, international and national political manipulation, as well as of the transcendental power of a game in the midst of poverty, famine, piracy and opulence in a few of the sixty nations that are 'Africa'.

25 years ago a single story began to emerge from the Horn of Africa, which may have contributed to the notion that there is only one story for the whole continent. It was the famine of Ethiopia, the result of successive harvest failures, coupled with unresponsive superpowers, immersed in the "Cold War Story". All these impacted on the need for humanitarian aid, to avert the

impact of 'climatic genocide' upon millions of people.

As the details the famine of Niger and Chad become increasingly evident, the question as to why it is happening and how it could have been prevented will be re-visited. However it is highly unlikely that it will be the prime story from the continent unless there is a journalist of the calibre of Michael Buerk, working for a large media corporation, or a rock star as big as Bob Geldof, to raise the profile of the disaster and demand that the world take note and act with its cash and food!

Thankfully the catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico may no longer be the threat it was, but there's still too much truth in what Leon Uris wrote fifty years ago, in his book, Exodus. "Only the Kingdom of heaven runs on righteousness... The kingdoms of the earth run on oil". The BP oil spillage has been headline news for the last three months, with reference to billions of dollars. Chad and Niger have rarely featured, and the amount of money needed to feed hungry people is significantly less.



Sierra Leone is now into the rains, the time that is referred to as the hungry season. Crops are planted during this time, to be harvest during the dry season. Last year's harvest has now finished. Subsistence agriculture depends on rainfall and sunshine and timing of both. If the rains start too early, or finish too late, the nation's harvest will be affected. For the subsistence farmer the balance of both rain and sun is vital, and neither can be plugged, capped or tapped.

Niger and neighbouring Chad, already among the poorest nations in the world, are at the centre of a food crisis affecting 10 million people in the Sahel region. The average age for Nigers and Chadians is 15.2 years and 16.6 years respectively. Figures last month showed that over one in



five children were already facing acute malnutrition in the worst-hit regions. These same children are already the food producers for their societies. It is increasingly apparent that the human cost of last year's failed rains in the Sahel belt could be as high as they were in 2005, when TV images of starving children shook the world out of its inertia, but it was too late to address the worst of the crisis. An appeal for an increase in the World Food Programme's aid for Niger and Chad to US\$253 million from US\$191 million has so far had little impact, with only 58 percent of the required figure having been provided, leaving a shortfall of US\$107 million.



In Sierra Leone, where the average age of the entire population is 19 years, the war children of the previous decade are now the fathers and mothers of their own children, and the education process that was severely disrupted, or denied to young parents is still evident. A nation's informal agricultural education is never assisted by the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of its citizens and unfortunately the need to establish an adequate income forces people to harvest the rainforest. The demand for hardwood timber by the oil rich Gulf States and beyond, has resulted in the growth of both the legal and illegal



logging industries. It is therefore encouraging to see that the government's initiative to ban the export of logs last year, has now been extended for a further three years. Logging for processing and for the domestic markets of fuel, furniture and the building industry are not affected, but the short term economic solution of raising cash from logging will have been seriously deterred.



It is unclear if FIFA's proposed new goal line technology will involve posts of timber or not. Throughout Salone the soccer goalposts are usually constructed of stout lengths of bamboo. There is an abundant supply of bamboo and huge stands of this versatile crop are often located alongside the nation's largest and thriving oil industry, the palm oil. But that is another story of food for a later date.