



# transforming Ethiopia

President Girma Wolde Giorgis  
speaks with Satinder Bindra



*It has been 23 years since the world first saw the searing images of the Ethiopian famine. Pictures of emaciated babies on the verge of death and grieving families will remain etched in our collective consciousness for a long time.*

*Approximately one million people died in the 1985 calamity. Another famine struck in 2000. Both events did produce change, though, with Ethiopian officials realizing that one of the reasons for droughts and famines was the destruction of the country's once healthy forest cover.*

*A few years ago, under the leadership of Ethiopia's President and dedicated environmentalist, Girma Wolde Giorgis, millions of Ethiopians from all walks of life began planting trees. Ethiopia also signed up as a participant in UNEP's Billion Tree Campaign and, according to President Giorgis, has planted over one billion trees — more than any other nation.*

*Recently 92-year-old President Giorgis sat down with UNEP's Director of Communications, Satinder Bindra, and explained the critical need for all Ethiopians to continue planting trees.*

*"When the first drought hit this country, there was a big drive for relief — relief here, relief there. The world reacted to help Ethiopia with food and other things, but then some guys, particularly the Red Cross sector, they thought: why not prevent drought? Why wait for the misery to come? To help people we have to prevent drought instead. What we are out for is to prevent a disaster. The disaster in the country is drought. To mitigate drought you have to have forest. In this country, at the turn of the century, forest cover was around 45 to 60 per cent, which now, we are really ashamed to say, is down to three. So, this must be stopped and we have to green the country."*

*SB: When you meet the children of this country and when they look up to you for guidance and inspiration, what do you tell them about trees?*

*"I tell you I have got a very interesting organisation — the scout movement. In the scouting system, from a small kid to adult, every young man is involved, because the future is his. He is planting for his well-being in the future. I think it is felt already by the young people too, because it is the young people whose future is at jeopardy, because the devastation of the forest, if it is not cured — if disaster prevention has not been promoted — it is the younger generation that will be affected, so they have to work hard to make their own future better. That is the idea."*

*SB: Excellency, we gather you have a tree planting slogan for the country?*

*"It is 'Two trees per person'. People plant two and more. We now say three. Instead of three they planted 13. We try to give them the guidance, show them the way. Awareness. That is what it is."*



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*SB: What kind of trees are they planting? Is it up to them? Do you provide the seedlings? How does the process work?*

*"We have stations for seedlings. We are campaigning for indigenous species. It is only indigenous species that can protect the soil and improve the climate and that in the long run will make the country safe."*

*SB: As an environmentalist though, Excellency, are you confident that this will stop drought? What are your inner thoughts?*

*"Well, I'm quite confident. It cannot be tomorrow, but it will happen. It takes time. Now already the frequency of drought has decreased. We used to have drought every ten or eight years. This time we didn't have drought for the last ten years, so we hope that the frequency decreases and that drought now hits certain pockets but not all the country."*

*SB: Excellency, others in the world are also planting trees. When they hear that Ethiopia has planted 700 million trees for its Millennium celebrations and another 300 million now, they find it hard to believe. What response would you like to give them?*

*"Why is it impossible? We have got 80 million people. If everybody gets up and works this is not impossible at all. And, I am very happy to say that everything is going well."*

*SB: Excellency, what were the biggest lessons learned during this campaign that you would you like to share with the rest of the international community?*

*"Give them the guide and the guidance and they do it. Therefore we are successful in our endeavour. And I think that in the other parts of the world, wherever the need is felt like in our country, I think they must have the same way of approaching it. It is not a matter of being ordered; it is not even a matter of mobilization; it is just a matter of awareness."*