

With reference to named examples, explain the causes, effects and solutions to famine

(10 marks)

Famine has been a global problem for many hundreds of years, but the worst famines have been during the last two centuries, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The worst famine in recorded history was the Great Chinese famine between 1958 and 1961. The famine had many different causes; both human and physical, and is the most deadly. The effects of the famine were widespread; China was effected socially, economically, politically and environmentally.

Arguably the most influential causes of the Great Chinese famine were human. The Communist Party of China that had taken hold in 1949, after the civil war, led by Chairman Mao Zedong, launched a new policy known as the 'Great Leap Forward' in 1958. In this policy he forced the collectivisation of agriculture, and farms were organised into vast, badly managed communes. The communes were ordered to plant less grain to save on costs and as the workers were forced to work, there was less incentive to work as effectively as they had before collectivisation; this caused the production of grain to fall by 15% in 1959 and a further 15% in 1960 and did not recover until 1962! Mao forced huge internal mass migration and made workers work in steel-furnaces to produce steel for industry instead of in the fields. All private methods of food production were taken away due to collectivisation, so the public relied solely on the communes. Another human cause of the famine was that Mao, even though he knew that it would worsen the famine, kept food exports high, so less food was available for the people in his own country. The wasteful practice of free grain for consumption in communal dining halls continued. Additionally, the Chinese government hid information about the extent of the famine from the rest of the world, so international powers did not know of the need for aid, which augmented the suffering. The people in power also ensured there was urban bias in food distribution so the leading elite and those in urban areas were fed before anyone else, which deteriorated the situation in rural areas.

Although the human causes may have been more prominent in the Great Chinese Famine, there were still physical aspects which made the famine worse. The flooding of the Yellow River in July 1959 in Eastern China caused widespread harvest failures and also meant that grain could not be planted easily as the soil was submerged, so less food was available. Soon after the flooding, extensive droughts also killed crops as they were so dehydrated; between 1959-1960 droughts and other bad weather affected 55% of all cultivated land and 60% of agricultural land in China received no rain at all! During the drought, the lack of water and high temperatures had baked the land hard, so that when the monsoon season arrived in July-September 1959 the monsoon rainwater could not infiltrate into the soil as it had become impermeable, and had to lie on top of the land and be transported as overland flow, which resulted in even more floods devastating land, and also meant transport links in most of South/ South-East China were affected, so the little aid that was sent out by the government could not get to the areas in dire need of it.

As a result of the Great Chinese Famine, between 15 and 30 million people died. The range of deaths is so large because the government tried to cover up the true extent of the famine and only recently are researching the full impact that the famine had in China. The death rate in Guizhou Province was the worst nationally during the famine at 52 per 1000 and in Henan Province it was 39 per 1000 in 1960. The famine also had other major social effects, in many areas marriages were postponed, due to the difficulty of providing a bride-price, and money for the marriage ceremonies, as well as the reluctance of the man's family to take in an extra mouth. Even when a couple did marry, births were postponed or avoided. In the years 1959 to 1961, there were between 21 million and 34 million fewer births than would have been expected by comparison with 'normal' years. Malnutrition would also in any case have reduced people's fertility. As people had very little food, so did their animals and livestock, as a result, there were millions of deaths of cattle and other useful farm animals. This damaged the economy agriculturally, as animals are required to do many tasks as many undeveloped, rural areas have not yet experienced mechanisation and rely on animals to do the work faster and more efficiently. The famine affected China's political relationship with other major world powers, as they felt that they could not trust the Chinese if they were going to hide information from them and just allow their people to die in their millions. Even other major Communist states, such as the USSR, were losing trust in the Chinese and this political unrest also meant that trading partners could be lost and so the economy could also

suffer. Environmentally, because many crops had failed nationally over a number of years, the animals that would have normally fed upon these crops, nutrients produced by the crops or seeds of the crops suffered. The lack of food adversely affected huge numbers of food chains and it took many years for animal, as well as plant, fertility and population numbers to rise again.

To solve these problems the government, albeit too late for many people, turned to a more sympathetic policy, which slowed exportation of foods and imported vast amounts of grain for the starving population. To help the country in the long term, in 1972 China bought 13 of the world's largest, most modern nitrogen fertiliser plants. More purchases of these plants followed; China then became the world's largest producer of nitrogenous fertilisers. They used them agriculturally in the growth of their own grain to help prevent famine should it occur again, by growing more grain and storing more in case there should be another famine. They have also built more food storehouses, so that if famine strikes, food can be quickly and evenly distributed. Over the years they have also built more reservoirs, such as the Three Gorges Dam in Hubei Province. Water from these enormous reservoirs can then be used to irrigate the soil for agriculture and restore the depleted groundwater that is used during droughts. The use of this water can be carefully monitored so that it can be used sustainably.

In conclusion, the Great Chinese Famine was one the largest ever human tragedies, but as a result of poor government policy and many natural disasters in quick succession, the scale of the disaster augmented beyond belief. Only with international intervention and a change in policy was the famine stopped.