

Famine is news if animals die

By **STEVE ASKIN**

Special to the National Catholic Reporter

NCR 14/8/92

NEW YORK — Question: When does a famine threatening millions of human lives become news fit for the front page?

Answer: When animals die.

That is the rule our nation's leading newspapers too often follow in their coverage of the dual crisis gripping Africa: drought in the south and war-induced famine in the north.

For evidence, look at *The New York Times*. When our nation's "paper of record" finally found front-page space for a story on drought in the southern African nation of Zimbabwe, it focused upon the fate of 2,000 elephants ("Zimbabwe Kills Starving Elephants for Food," July 5). Not until the ninth paragraph did readers learn that drought also threatened five million Zimbabwean people.

This story launched a weeklong parade of African wildlife through the

Times. On July 7, a 28-inch report described the Zimbabwean black rhino's "last stand."

On July 12, the paper devoted 38 inches of copy to elephant viewing at Botswana's \$200-plus per day game parks, but found only 17 inches for the world's most murderous human tragedy of 1992: the war-induced famine in Somalia.

By the time the *Times* belatedly intensified its Somalia coverage in late July, more than 25 percent of Somalia's children under 5 had already died, according to estimates by the international aid group Medecins Sans Frontieres. "An entire generation may disappear" if they don't receive immediate assistance, MSF warned at a July 22 congressional hearing that received no coverage in the *Times*.

This story is adapted from the September issue of Extra!, a magazine of media criticism and analysis. Steve Askin is a former NCR Africa correspondent.