

WOMAN IN THE NEWS CATHERINE BERTINI

Fighter of famines

The head of the World Food Programme has an understated manner. But it conceals a determined reformer who believes in finding things out for herself, writes **Mark Turner**

In the drought-stricken Somali region of Ethiopia, a diminutive dark-haired woman enters a seething swirl of aid workers, local officials and reporters.

She is quietly-spoken, and her conservative attire attracts some comment. Her thick, woolly socks and shapeless skirt give the impression of a Girl Scout leader rather than the person despatched by Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, to be the UN special envoy to the Horn of Africa.

But Catherine Bertini is far from diffident. There has been a spate of security incidents over previous months, including the murder of a driver for the French relief organisation Médecins sans Frontières. What are the authorities going to do about the problem, and when are they going to bring those responsible to justice, she demands. If things are not taken in hand, she will be reluctant to send in aid workers.

The world has seen such confrontations before. Figures such as Bob Geldof, the pop star, who drew attention to a famine in Ethiopia in 1984. Geldof was not shy of shaming officials publicly. But Ms Bertini does not deliberately court controversy - she has avoided commenting on whether Ethiopia's war with Eritrea has made matters worse.

Nor is she a public figure using her fame for a good cause. She has spent eight years in the business of famine relief, since being appointed executive director of the UN's World Food Programme in 1992. During her tenure, she has focused the organisation on famine relief rather than agricultural development, and has reformed its bureaucracy.

Her supporters argue that the WFP has become notably more effective, as well as bigger, under her control. It is now a mighty logistical machine, capable of flying, shipping and trucking hundreds of thousands of tonnes of supplies to the most remote and insecure global regions.

Between 1993 to 1998 the share of global food aid contributed by the WFP rose from 22 to 36 per cent, and it served 75m people. Ms Bertini has worked hard to increase the voluntary contributions made by governments, as opposed to the funds they contribute through the UN. The

started fund-raising for the Republican party at the age of 13.

She was a talented clarinettist as a child, and had ambitions of becoming a professional musician, but she was drawn to politics by a Republican seminar for teenagers that she attended at the age of 15. "That is what really caught my life-long interest in government," says Ms Bertini. "It was absolutely fascinating: I decided I was going to change my career [ambitions]."

At college in Albany, where she studied political science, Ms Bertini was active in student politics and worked part-time at the

pursued a textbook political career. She started in 1970 as a secretary in Nelson Rockefeller's office - a position that was something of a disappointment. "I was supposed to be on special projects, but then I got there and they said: 'Can you type?'"

She soon became a state-wide organiser for Republican youth. After three to four years she moved to the national party, then rebuilding itself in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

By 1987, she was acting assistant secretary in the Department of Health, in charge of implementing welfare reform for single mothers. In 1989, she became assistant secretary in the Department of Agriculture, where she updated the food stamps system and promoted breastfeeding rather than the use of formula baby milk. In 1992, she was appointed head of the WFP.

Ms Bertini prides herself on taking a democratic approach in her current job. She describes how, in her previous job, during a visit to a food distribution centre for mothers, she only understood their problems once she went through the procedure herself. "I said I was a single mother with a one-year-old girl, who was breastfeeding. So they said 'here you go' - they loaded me up with different kinds of food, they gave me cheeses and cereals. I had two bags to carry home for the month.

"Then they said we were not going to another part of the room, where there were huge piles of infant formula. I said why not, and they said: 'Because you are breastfeeding and aren't eligible.' I thought wow - here's a reason why poor women aren't breastfeeding. If you're poor, you

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focus on famine relief has helped to boost voluntary contributions to \$1.7bn a year.

Ms Bertini's role has given her a minor presence on the world stage, allowing her to converse with leaders such as Fidel Castro of Cuba and Edward Shevardnaze of Georgia. She is not shy of imposing her views - even sometimes holding back shipments of food. She halted feeding programmes in schools in Afghanistan three years ago in protest at the decision of the Taliban leadership to exclude girls from education.

Ms Bertini was well trained in holding her own in political circles. She was brought up in upstate New York where her father ran for the city council in Cortland, and imbued his daughter with a love of politics. She

state legislature, then under Nelson Rockefeller, the moderate Republican governor.

"I decided that the basic tenets in which I believe were mostly to do with the rights of the individual and individual freedom, and the role of the government in terms of managing foreign relations, keeping the peace and providing basic social services," she says. "I felt being a Republican was a usually a comfortable place."

Has she changed her politics since? She bursts out laughing. "It's hard to say. From 18 to 50 you must change something... I still believe government shouldn't be too complicated, but I also believe there is a basic responsibility of government to provide for people who are poor."

In the intervening years, she

think you should do everything possible for your baby; and they would have given me so much if I wasn't breastfeeding that I couldn't even carry it home."

She wins plaudits at the WFP for her practical focus, open-door policy and desire to listen to those the organisation serves. She has streamlined a formerly bloated management, as well as introducing more women. But her determination to change things has not made her univer-

sally popular. Some staff speak of her strong temper, occasionally heavy-handed style, and a tendency towards micro-managing the organisation.

Despite her sometimes reticent public manner, Ms Bertini has ensured that the WFP gets across its message by hiring skilled public relations professionals. That could help with her next career move, as she approaches the end of her tenure at the organisation. Some of those around her suggest

she could be heading for political office in a future Republican administration, if elected.

But Ms Bertini is too well-trained in political ways to admit publicly to such ambitions. When asked what she will do next, the outspoken UN official reverts to a quiet, even shy, manner. "I don't know," she says. "I've always been clear in my mind that I want to make a difference, but I've never been clear in my mind what my next job will be."