

# On the Refugee Problem in Eritrea

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## Introduction

**B**y the end of 2000, at least 34.5 million people—refugees and internally displaced—had fled their homes because of war, persecution, and human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup> Combined, the number of people that have been uprooted roughly equals the sum of the populations of Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and Greece.<sup>2</sup>

Of these, an estimated 25 million people are internally displaced in at least 40 countries.<sup>3</sup> These people live in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, Afghanistan, Colombia, and many other countries. Afghanistan hosts the second largest community of internally-displaced persons (IDPs), after Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

The United States Committee on Refugees estimates that there are over 14 million refugees worldwide<sup>5</sup>—an increase of 4 percent from last year, with Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, and Vietnam as the top 10 countries.<sup>6</sup>

The following analyzes the refugee crisis of Eritrea as a case study to better understand the plight of refugees and the internally displaced worldwide, and to identify ways that the international community can help.

## Eritrea: A Brief History

At the end of the nineteenth century, Italians colonized Eritrea, joining together loosely related people from nine ethnic groups. The original ratio of 50 percent Orthodox Christians and 50 percent Sunni Muslims still exists today. Their forced colonization disrupted already existing economic, social, and legal systems in these communities. The Italians developed Eritrea as a settler colony, setting up roads, plantations, seaports, and an army of 65,000 Eritreans who would fight in Italy's other colonies, Libya and Somalia.

In 1952, the UN combined Eritrea with neighboring Ethiopia under a federation, giving Eritrea two official languages and its own flag, constitution, and parliament. The United States, interested



IDP camp in Gash Barka, Eritrea.



Top: Eritrean woman in Senafe IDP camp. Bottom: Festivities in Gherset celebrating the fourth day of a baby's life.

in the strategic Red Sea access from Eritrea, backed this pact, gaining several military and communication bases in Eritrea as a pay-back for the arrangement. No poll was ever taken asking the Eritrean people to vote on the matter.

Immediately after this federation was formed, the emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, completely stripped Eritreans of all rights and autonomy, as had been agreed upon in the pact, and banned all forms of public protest. Eritreans were met with silence when they petitioned the UN to at least uphold the terms of the federation pact. Further, Emperor Haile Selassie disbanded the Eritrean national assembly and annexed the territory, triggering a 30-year liberation war by Eritreans. It is widely believed among Eritreans and non-Eritreans alike that these events and the failure

of the international community to act justly without underlying interests are the sources of the current suffering in Eritrea.

The next 30 years of the liberation war were critical in defining the Eritrean government's growing distrust with international agencies. Although Eritrea and Ethiopia share roughly the same geography and demographics, Eritrea was left to fend for itself in gaining its freedom and keeping its population from starving to death. Meanwhile, many of the world's great powers looked upon Ethiopia with mainly political motivation and contributed billions and billions of dollars in food and military aid. In fact, from 1952–1976 more than half of all U.S. aid to Africa's 54 countries went to Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1950s, in the midst of a war fought by civilians in rubber sandals with rifles, the United States introduced the first jet fighters to appear on the African continent. Their mission was to fight for Ethiopia to conquer Eritrea in return for prime land on the Red Sea's coast for communication and spy bases to monitor Europe and Asia. The jet fighters raised the level of military sophistication with U.S.-supplied F-86 Sabre Jets and counterinsurgency tactics borrowed from the

Vietnam War. Israel also sent military advisers and arms. When the reinforced Ethiopian army invaded Keren, a market center in the heart of the country, the first flow of Eritreans fled to Sudan.

When a military junta overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, the Soviet Union became aligned with Ethiopia. The war escalated quickly when \$11 billion in new arms from Moscow were sent to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. The second wave of refugees fled to Sudan. Fighting had reached the heart of the Eritrean capital, Asmara, which changed the demographics of the refugees to also include urban as well as rural dwellers.

In 1978, fighting almost entirely with captured weapons, the Eritreans were able to secure the Sahil Mountains of Eritrea, occupying this area as a base for the next 10 years.

A massive famine in 1984 posed an even larger problem. Tens of thousands of Eritreans were forced to cross the border into Sudan in search of food and safety. It is estimated that the number of Eritrean refugees in Sudan had peaked at about 500,000.<sup>8</sup>

For the next 13 years, thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians died as the war continued. In May 1991 Eritrea overthrew Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, finally obtaining its freedom.

## Current Refugee Situation

Over the last 30 years, more than one million Eritrean refugees languished in exile abroad, more than half of them in urban slums and rural refugee camps in Sudan.<sup>9</sup> Although several hundred thousand people have returned to Eritrea, there are still an estimated 142,000 Eritreans in Kassala and Gedaref in Sudan.<sup>10</sup> The U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has worked in collaboration with UNMEE (UN Mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia) to repatriate a total of 36,500 Eritrean refugees from Sudan.<sup>11</sup> An overwhelming majority of these refugees originally come from Gash-Barka, the western region of Eritrea.

Within Eritrea, another 50,000 are currently internally displaced.<sup>12</sup> These IDPs have fled three times in the last 10 years, each time because of renewed military conflict. They lived in relatives' homes when lucky enough, but mostly they fled to the mountains, where they attempted to do what Eritreans do best: survive. Right now there is no Ethiopian occupation in Eritrea, but land mines prevent the IDPs from finally going home.

Eritreans that lived in Ethiopia were also expelled in 1998 when full-scale fighting broke out again. In 2000, when Ethiopia captured about one third of Eritrea's sands (the Gash Barka Zone), one million Eritreans fled, including tens

of thousands of new refugees to Sudan. Tens of thousands of Eritreans had been permanently disabled, hundreds of thousands dead. A third of the population was displaced, a third of those people being children. It is estimated that every Eritrean family lost two or three members to the war. It is this deepest sacrifice of flesh and blood that makes the reality of the current emergency situation even more painful for Eritreans worldwide. The male population has been decreased dramatically, affecting the most fundamental socioeconomic systems in the country. Among the refugee population, an overwhelming majority of families are female-headed, severely affecting agricultural production. For IDPs in particular, 80 percent of households are female-headed.<sup>13</sup>

### Field Research

The meaning of the title of Dan Connell's *Getting Home Is Only Half the Challenge* really hit home in my recent trip to Eritrea. Over the course of three weeks I attempted to experience and photograph the refugee experience of the IDPs and repatriates of Eritrea. It was one thing to read reports and statistics, it was an entirely different thing to see the crisis through their eyes.

### Education

One woman told me that she had chosen to settle in Gherset because it offered better schools for her children than the other resettlement camps in Gash Barka. Her three children attended school at the UNESCO funded facilities. (See photo.) In most areas, school is available until the 5th grade in both Tigrinia, the national language, and Arabic, a language spoken by most Eritrean Muslims, especially those returning from camps in Sudan. When possible, the schools are integrated to facilitate the full inclusion of refugees into society. The teacher of the school pictured estimated about 80 students per class. School is held six days a week, from 7a.m. to noon. At the beginning of each school year, each pupil receives five exercise books to write in. The schools lack other educational supplies to enhance the lessons, such as maps and charts. In other resettlement villages, especially in areas where IDPs have fled, school is being held in abandoned buildings, and under trees.

### Health

I visited Gherset on a very special day. It was the fourth day of a child's life, and the celebrations had just begun. She was born to a 27-year-old woman who had lived in a refugee camp in Sudan since the age of 3. She had grown up, married, and given birth to her three other children in a refugee camp. She had lived in Gherset for

seven months with her mother, aunt, husband, and children. The birth was her fourth. Each time her mother had been the midwife; the floor of the tent had been their maternity ward. I asked what would have happened if there had been complications with the birth. The aunt stared at me blankly. The mother looked at the ground. The grandmother looked at her hands in her lap. I shifted uncomfortably. Outside, the translator/guide told me that there was absolutely no transportation to or from the camp. Since there was also no on-site health clinic, refugees could not take advantage of the free health care that their refugee I.D. cards granted them at any health clinic in the region. I asked the local guide when he had last seen a doctor. He said it had been a few years—since the day he had left Sudan.

Every repatriate undergoes a basic health screening for sicknesses that would allow him or her to sit in a bus rather than stand in a truck. There are not enough medical supplies to afford a follow-up visit for the thousands of war-injured refugees. Malaria and polio are the most common sicknesses reported in the clinics.

That afternoon, my host family prepared a very special dinner—*ghat*, a meal made from flour roasted on an open fire and mixed with boiling water and salt. As the women stirred the flour, they made loud, high-pitched jubilations, signaling the great miracle for the entire neighborhood to hear. Another child had been born in Gherset.

### Food Aid

Food is distributed once a month in Senafe to the 11,000 IDPs who reside in the area. Representatives from each family make the trip to the distribution site, sometimes walking for more than a day. Each person receives wheat, oil, salt, and kerosene.

For repatriates, a two-month ration is given upon entry to Eritrea as well as a metal and canvas family shelter kit. The UNHCR also distributes hand tools for farming, or a cash equivalent for those who wish to resettle in the cities. No training is provided, however, as part of the aid package. In some areas, distribution of two



Top: Gherset school and teacher.  
Bottom: Festivities in Gherset celebrating the fourth day of a baby's life.

hectares of farmland per refugee family has begun. After their first two months, they receive monthly food rations for one year. After that, they are expected to have found means to survive.

For both groups, high-calorie biscuits are given, when available, to malnourished children and pregnant or lactating mothers, but recent shortages have made this difficult.

### Shelter

Each family receives a *rhonda* structure (a domelike metal frame of about 10 feet by 6 feet) and the mats needed to cover it—straw mats for summer, plastic mats for the rainy season. The locals say that even in the rainy season, it is often too hot to use the plastic mats, so they do their best to improvise with mud and straw, bending and shaping the *rhonda* structure to better suit their needs. (See photo.) In the early 1990s corrugated metal was often donated by international agencies, but has since been abandoned as the heat makes the metal an unsuitable roof. Occasionally, fire breaks out in one hut, and several homes can quickly burn to the ground at once.

Currently, there is a shortage of *rhonda* structures all over the country, leaving families to live in plastic tents held up by branches and ropes. Often, a tent of about 200 square feet, partitioned by a cloth to make separate rooms, houses a family of seven. If the family keeps livestock such as feed chickens, they must also share the space, as there are no permanent materials with which to make sturdy fences. UN volunteers say it won't be long until the tents run out.

### Water

Drought has affected water supplies for both agriculture and drinking for the last 17 years. At the camps, water is either available by pump or delivered by trucks once a month. Diseases are rampant, especially in those camps where water is kept in large storage tanks for extended periods of time. Widespread chlorination will not be possible until an organized water system is developed for the entire country. Even in the capital city, residents are being forced to turn to bottled water as the Italian-built pipes are beginning to rust, releasing dangerous chemicals into the water supply. For the poorer residents, there is no way to avoid the risk of drinking these poisons. Sanitation is a concern, as these refugees have inhabited temporary housing for years. Long-term human waste systems have not been developed. In some camps, makeshift latrines have been set up on the outskirts of town, but many people simply head to the mountains. For the stalls, there are sanitation workers who empty the

large tanks of human waste when they are completely filled. Combine this lack of proper latrines with a poor water supply and poor handling at the household level, and you have the potential for severe diarrhea outbreaks, especially among children.<sup>14</sup>

### Land Mines

Four teenage boys were killed and three others seriously injured in a mine accident outside Senafe during my last week in Eritrea. According to the UN Mine Action Coordination Center (UNMACC), inhabitants of that area had been educated about land mine safety procedures, and the demarcations had been made.<sup>15</sup> In the last few years, over 70 people have died in mine accidents, and over 150 more have been injured. Clearly, deactivation of land mines is a key factor in determining when many of the IDPs can return home safely.

### Solutions

While there is no definitive answer for the refugee problem in Eritrea, or any other part of the world, there are a number of potential solutions worth investigating. The key to any sustainable solution is that it is designed especially for these refugees given their exact circumstances; a cookie-cutter approach certainly will not work. The problems are multitiered. There is the immediate concern for the basic human needs such as food and shelter, but there is also the need for organization of health care and water systems and a long-term strategy for reintegrating these refugees into society. Among the many needs in Eritrea:

- Training for repatriates on making an income.
- Supplies for elementary and secondary schools in camps.
- Medical supplies including land mine kits, malaria, and polio vaccinations.
- Improved structures built to better suit Eritrea's geography and climate. Also, a material alternative to the traditional wood and thatch, which is used to build homes but is currently in short supply.
- Water sanitation systems suitable for either individual homes or entire camps, but also separate systems for agriculture and livestock.
- Land mine clearance teams to mark dangerous zones, and deactivation of the more than 2 million mines<sup>16</sup> that exist in Eritrea.
- Family reunification programs to address the separation of families in the aftermath of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict. ■

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