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## Information and Update on Refugees entering Afar Region from Eritrea

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### **1. The situation in summary**

As of late 2005 there has been a steady and increasing trickle of refugees entering into Ethiopia from Eritrea, arriving in Afar Region. All refugees entering are of Afar origin and claim they are escaping untoward situation endangering/ threatening their human rights in Eritrea. Of those entering, more than 95% are male and the vast majority are youth from 15 years to 35 years. There are also a small number of women with their children entering. These women's husbands have not returned from the military for 2 or even 4 years and the women can no longer support and tolerate looking after their household in Eritrea due to the extreme economic crisis in Eritrea (basic food costs are 5 times that of Ethiopia) and they cannot get assistance since their community is very much disintegrated. Again, the majority of youth claim they are escaping compulsory involvement in the Eritrean military while a few speak of fleeing actual harassment.

Afar National Regional State's northern border is a 1,000 kilometers frontier with Eritrea. The highest numbers are penetrating the border at a place called Ragle Ba'ad in Dallo Woreda and through Afdeera the adjoining woreda. A few are coming through the border north of Buure in Eli Daar Woreda but since this woreda is better policed by military, less are escaping this way. Others enter Djibouti and then come into Ethiopia through Galaafe.

Offices of ARA, the Ethiopian government partner to UNICEF has established two rural camps for the refugees: one in Aba'ala and the second in Barahale, both in the northern western Zone 2 of the region. Refugee registration has begun in the urban areas of Assayita, Dubte, Logya and Semara. APDA estimates the total refugee population that has entered Ethiopia since 2005 to be around 8 to 9,000 people. See below.

### **2. Background to the situation**

The two nations, Eritrea and Ethiopia have been in unresolved conflict since 1998. Actual war was fought from May 1998 to early June 2000 with untold human and property loss. Immediately after a cease – fire was declared the offices of the International Community set about formulating a resolution. In June 2000, the so-called Algerian Accord was published and in April 2002, the International Court of the Hague pronounced a ruling on the conflict. The issue for all intent and purpose appears to be that of the border demarcation: Eritrea claiming land in Ethiopia and voices in Ethiopia claiming land in

Eritrea. Others have said the sparking point of the conflict was the introduction of the Eritrean currency, the Nakfa in 1997. This then is all under the back - drop that the 2 nations were in fact one country prior to Eritrea gaining independence from Ethiopia after 30 years of struggle in May 1991.

Since the June 2000 declared ceasefire, the military has been on full alert on both sides of the border and the border areas have been out of bounds to normal civilian crossing. As of December 5<sup>th</sup> 2005, Eritrea has refused the peace perusal of the international peace keeping forces, UNMEE, not permitting them to fly across Eritrean airspace. Evidently, the Eritrean national effort has been wholly militarily orientated enforcing army conscription for citizens of all ages since the outbreak of conflict on an ongoing basis. Grade 11 students must enter the military training center at Sawwa to undertake their matriculation examinations. Families are obliged to pay reportedly from 20,000 to 50,000 Nakfa to absent their child from this. If the child flees then the closest guardians – father, mother or otherwise is obliged to spend time in prison.

### **3. The situation that drove these people to leave their homeland**

The mainly male youth that flee seeking asylum in Ethiopia are estimated as 60% students and teachers; around 35% from the Eritrean military and a 5% of other occupations such as garage mechanics, drivers, merchants and so on. A group of refugees interviewed in Logya listed the following reasons why they took the action of fleeing:

- Involuntary and endless national military service. Students are forced to complete secondary school in military training camp called Sawwa
- Government is dictating – no possibility of democratic reason
- No human rights means no future
- We fear since so many of our families have been imprisoned
- We were forced to be a member of the political party, supporting them with money, attending monthly meetings and following their ideas
- Schools are controlled by the military. They even store guns in the school buildings near the Ethiopian borders
- Teachers were called up for military training
- All workers are taken to the military. When they are released, they are put on a lower salary (same as the military – 145 Nacfa) despite the fact they return to town living.
- The government is taking action against people who strictly follow their religion, whether Moslem or Christian saying that they are extremist.

The following interviews describes well the extremity of the problem these people are facing:

#### **a) Young man of around 25 years from Assab**

Initially he said he was taken from Assab for military training and escaped from the training camp. Some months later, he was captured in Assab and charged with passing secret information to Ethiopia and imprisoned for 2 years and 7 months at a place called Rasbaras – somewhere between Harsile and the Ethiopian border. His prison was an underground shell of meter length – just enough space for him alone – no space to move but could lie down and sit. He had no idea of daylight or night; heard nothing and had sole contact with Tigrinya soldiers. He was fed 3 times daily with one bread and sometimes the water of meat and lentils. He was taken in silence twice daily to the toilet that was also underground. For the first 3 months, he claims he was beaten repeatedly in order to give information of his supposed connections. When asked how he retained his sanity, he said I remembered Mr Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison before he got his freedom so

that he kept himself to the belief that he would get it too if he waited. He said he heard of several people who went mad in the same prison and some who died of the beatings.

Once released, he tried to join his wife in Bidu, a rural border area of Eritrea. Again, he was captured mid - journey in Waddi and sent back to Assab as the Eritreans feared he was trying to escape to Ethiopia. He spent one night in Assab, secured money from a friend, gave 500 Nacfa to a Tigrinya to drive him 60 kilometers to Baylul, with a further 20 Nacfa got transport to Waddi then walked to Bidu. He then hid in the hills of Bidu for 12 nights waiting for people to help him in his further journey to freedom. Eventually, he joined 42 men fleeing from the strugglers who had supported an anti-government movement and walked a further 13 days and nights before reaching safety in Afdeera. The Afar community fed them with animals from their household herds on the route.

He was released after 2 years and 7 months along with 5 others. Of the 5 others, 2 remain in Eritrea – he thinks they never got the chance to escape and 2 have joined him in Logya and APDA is supporting them to study in Assayita. This man has only Grade 6 education as his parents died when he was young and there was no one to negotiate with the government for his continued education. He says he would firstly like to get a job to secure his own food and welfare and then, if the opportunity came, study something to get a better chance. Currently, he lives with a group of refugees supported by APDA.

b) Twenty three year old girl who arrived in July

This young girl decided to make the journey to her freedom in early July 2006 and arrived in Logya at the end of the month. She was a grade 11 student in Assab and was called up to join the military training. Not wanting to involve her parents, and fearing the prospect of entering a male – dominated military camp where she was sure she would not be safe, she took a vehicle to Bidu and then with other Afar, walked 7 days and nights to reach Afdeera. People in Afdeera brought her to Logya. Because she left, her younger sister and father were imprisoned. Once they released the sister, she was immediately married since married women are not taken for military training. This girl told us there is no other option than for Afar girls in Eritrea to be married as soon as they have completed grade 10. She says that the parents must sign a form guaranteeing the child for military training when they are in Grade 5. If they drop out of school before completing Grade 10, then they are taken from their homes to the military camp in Sawwa. She now learns in Grade 9 but aspires to learn so that she can be a capable professional person. She also spoke of another girl her age who was imprisoned in Assab for refusing military conscription. This girl on release was found to be diabetic – a disease caused by the extreme fright of the prison.

#### 4. Numbers and where the refugees are in Afar Region

APDA has calculated 8,597 people who have arrived from Eritrea from mid 2005 up until the current time as follows:

Woreda	Locality	Number
Afdeera	Throughout the woreda	680
Barahale	Throughout the woreda	1,375
Konnaba	Throughout the woreda	500
Dallol	Throughout the woreda	1,590
Dallol	Ragle Badda	2,040
Dubte	Dubte town	483
Dubte	Logya town	964
Assayita	Assayita town	920
Eli Daar	Buure district	45
<b>Total</b>		<b>8,597</b>

#### 5. Current needs of the refugee community

##### 5.1 Rural refugees

In the rural areas of Dallol, Aba'ala, Konnaba and Barahale, the refugees live among their clan since they came without any animals. To date, refugee food assistance has not been started. In particular, the woreda officials of Dallol in meeting with APDA and the government expressed the fact that drought is continuing in their district. Therefore, they said it is very difficult to support an additional population with water and food. These rural refugees have no other particular services of health other than the meager services available to the community of the area. Therefore basic needs of food, water, medical care, traditional mats to make daboyta (Afar rural house) and household utensils are needed.

##### 5.2 Urban refugees

Urban refugees are almost all young males living in Dubte, Logya, Assayita and Semara in the houses of the resident Afar community. (This is peculiarly Afar culture to assist a fellow – Afar in need regardless of clan affiliation.) In summary these people need living support and education/ training since they are all fully or partly educated and all have the drive to take their learning further.

Out of the motivation of these urban refugees, an association now registered with the government formed. The youth call their association Afar Students Knowledge Promotion Association and have the chief objective of mobilizing all Afar youth (both of Eritrean origin and Ethiopian) toward education, training and gender equality in the Afar society. This association is working closely with APDA, hoping to make the most of human youth resources. Through raising contribution, APDA is currently supporting some youth to study in the new Ethiopian school year in order to get recognized certificates. Even if the students come with certificates from Eritrea, the Ethiopian education system drops them back 2 years. Therefore there is need to

- a) Living support
- b) Support existing learning students
- c) Find skills training for others in mechanics, electricity and construction
- d) Support those who can with scholarship for higher education.