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Information and Update on Refugees entering Afar Region from Eritrea

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1. The situation in summary

Time has lapsed since the first update (November 6th 2006) of the growing crisis causing people to leave Eritrea as refugees. However, the situation actually deserves far more attention since news of an evermore isolated society in Eritrea is grim. By any means, the Eritrean Government seems bent on preventing its citizens from seeking outside help from the outside areas such as the Yemen and Djibouti, societies the Afar in Eritrea normally relate to. The country remains beset on grabbing the minds of the people for military exploitation – recent flash massive call up of people to the army in Teoh on the Red Sea coast is an ongoing reminder of this.

In the last months, few new refugees have reached as far as Logya in Afar Region, most likely indicative of the increasing strangle – hold of security: strong border military build – up roads blockaded and the ever – certain threat of family imprisonment if one person disappears from the house.

2. News of further human rights violations

2.1 Food/ supplies and domestic crisis in Eritrea

In the last months, the Eritrean government has tightened its insistence on being the only supplier of food and domestic supplies. The government agency known as '09' sells all commodities through a rationing system to the household. Through this system, the government sells relief food to the community. Anyone going to Djibouti or to Yemen to get supplies is imprisoned on return and his/ her relatives imprisoned during the absence.

Anyone going for medical treatment to Djibouti is considered 'disappeared ' and the relatives must pay 50,000:00 Nakfa or face imprisonment. In order to further enforce this, the main road into Mulhilli is blockaded.

2.2 Djibouti returning people fleeing from Eritrea

The Djibouti government is sending back any person found as a deserter from the Eritrean army in particular and any Eritrean Afar found in Djibouti. Therefore, Afar refugees in Djibouti are not exposing themselves or seeking assistance.

2.3 Military round – up and pressure

Two months ago, there was a high pressure 'raff' – round up of all citizens in the Teoh district for the military. Again, the border areas are now highly occupied by the Eritrean army to the extent the military has taken over many civilian institutions such as schools and clinics.

2.4 Foreign tourists and local Ethiopians kidnapped from Hamad 'Eela

In the evening of March 1st, 15 foreign tourists; 15 Ethiopian tourist company employees and local Afar were rounded up and driven into Eritrea. At the time of writing, it is not known exactly how many local Afar were captured along with the looting of local money and goods. Hamad 'Eela, a famous tourist site some 40 kilometers in Ethiopia from the Eritrean border.

The great fear now is for the captured Ethiopians that will languish beyond the diplomatic release of tourists in the worst possible jails: tied to bed – frames; left to sit up without moving in an underground prison and so on.

3. Appeal for International Response

Some 250 international and national delegates attending the Development Conference held in Assayita, Afar National Regional State on January 29th signed a declaration of appeal to international authorities to intervene in protecting Eritrean civilians from atrocities. This appeal remains abundantly current and can be cited on www.arhotabba.com

4. Current situation to assist refugees in Afar Region

3.1 Government/ UNHCR assistance

Refugees are now registered for assistance in camps in Aba'ala and Barahale in the region's north – west as well as in the urban areas of the central area of the region. In the last month, hundreds of Eritrean refugees were registered in Dubte and Assayita and a registration will take place in the Buure district in the far north of Eli Daar Woreda (close to the border with Eritrea in the coming weeks.

Registered refugees received a non-food item kit of household utensils as initial assistance. It is accepted that food assistance will commence soon.

3.2 APDA

APDA is expecting to gain NGO support to begin a training workshop teaching refugees skills in mechanics, electricity, plumbing and computer. The organization is also contributing from its membership to support refugees in undertaking Ethiopian final education so that their qualifications can be recognized.

4. Urgent needs

- a) To continue to advocate at every possible level for those suffering human rights violations
- b) Support young refugees wanting to continue their education
- c) Assist those suffering psychological trauma as a result of having faced atrocities such as imprisonment to recover
- d) Support those who require scholarship assistance to complete their qualifications