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Information and Update on Refugees entering Afar Region from Eritrea

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1. The situation in summary

During 2008, the situation for civilians in Eritrea deteriorated sharply both prompted by an increasingly severe militarization policy in the country and the fact that drought and food price inflation has left most areas with chronic hunger. The compulsory policy of military participation still stands and all students of grade 10 and above are taken from the family by force. There are no outlets of humanitarian assistance and all food must be obtained from the government hands. People then have taken huge risk to flee from Eritrea into Ethiopia in ever – increasing numbers. It is now estimated that refugees from Eritrea living in Afar Region have doubled reaching almost 22,000. Due to the double problem, people flee out of fear arriving in a status of poor nutrition and destitution.

This has certainly created an increasing humanitarian crisis in Afar Region, Ethiopia since the region itself has and is severely affected by drought. Still at least half of the refugees are living in the community in Ethiopia, not in a refugee camp. In the two government - established refugee camps there are 11,000 registered refugees. The remainder live with the already drought – impoverished Afar community in Ethiopia. This then has created a high burden on the community in Ethiopia and APDA has and continues to treat severe malnutrition among the refugees particularly in Eli Daar.

2. News of further human rights violations

As previously reported, Eritrea has adopted one of the most inhumane imprisonments known: people are kept in under-ground dugouts no bigger than the size of a person sitting with their knees bent up, unable to see the light of day or hear anything for up to 3 years. Throughout 2008, there were several recorded disappearances, the most recent being just 10 days ago. After forces opposing the Eritrean army attacked their base in Assbolo, 35 men from that locality, 15 from nearby Afembo and 9 from Waddi were taken. Their current whereabouts is not known but their families can only be left to believe they are imprisoned or at worst, arbitrarily killed. Meanwhile women left behind were subjected to rape. As a result of this turmoil, 45 refugees entered Buure in northern Eli Daar three days ago; 160 people have fled to Djibouti and a further 150 have entered Sudan in the last week.

Again, the heinous crime of killing Issa Ahaw, the leading clan elder of Waddi in front of his family 6 weeks ago has driven his entire community into Afar Region, Ethiopia for fear of

further blood-shed. This man was slaughtered by the military and then his body was dismembered while his family was forced to look on. This community is now recovering this horror in Su'ula, some 45 kilometers south of Buure in Eli Daar. Issa's brother is still in hiding in Manda just out of Su'ula unable to speak.

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.

Over and above these youths, as mentioned above, there are an increasing number of families, sometimes only women with their children who are escaping an unsustainable life in Eritrea. Women are fleeing when their husbands are taken by the military. These people are absolutely destitute when they arrive and many have moderate to severe malnutrition.

Finally, there are a number of Eritrean soldiers coming into Ethiopia. Apparently the Eritrean army is ordered to shoot fleeing soldiers on sight but now an increasing number are coming as small groups that have agreed together, both Tigrinya soldiers and Afar.

4. Numbers and where the refugees are in Afar Region

The following figures are estimates supplied by the Red Sea Fighters organization:

Woreda	Locality	Number
Afdeera	Throughout the woreda	700
Barahale	Throughout the woreda	4,000
Erebt	Throughout the woreda	3,500
Konnaba	Throughout the woreda	500
Dallol	Throughout the woreda	7,000
Dubte	Dubte town	400
Dubte	Logya town	1,500
Assayita	Assayita town	1,000
Eli Daar	Buure district	4,500
Total		23,100

5. Current needs of the refugee community

5.1 Rural refugees

In the rural areas of Eli Daar, Dallol, Aba'ala, Erebti and Barahale, the refugees live among their clan since they came without any animals. All these districts are affected anyway by drought and the local community has very limited household resources to share. Refugee food of dry ration to 11,000 registered refugees of 12 kilograms of grain per month and oil is insufficient. There is a serious food need and currently among the refugees in Eli Daar, a crisis whereby the 500 – odd refugee households in Su'ula have not received food since December. They urgently need pulses, oil and sugar. APDA is treating some 230 of them for severe acute malnutrition. While this community now has blankets, there is a clear shortage of child – clothing and they constantly require basic medications.

Again, APDA has opened schooling for over 250 students in Su'ula but there is a need for basic teaching material.

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. APDA now wants to establish skilled training for such people in Logya in carpentry, leatherwork, handicrafts and the hospitality trade. This requires support in equipment and training fund.

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.