

Effect of Drought on the Afar People and the Role of the Diaspora

Introduction

It is a known fact that the Horn of Africa is one of the most affected parts of the world when it comes to drought, but what is less known is that the Afar pastoralists is one the most vulnerable groups. Repeated droughts in the last 2 decades have brought the Afars to the brink of extinction as some regional observers point out.

This is why, in some analyses, the most worried experts describe the plight of the Afar people as being most dangerous. And therefore they now and then send out warning signals that this vicious circle can lead to the extension of this population without radical intervention from the governments and other stake holders in the countries they live in, namely Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. The international community, too, has to shoulder its responsibility.

The Afar Diaspora must be in the forefront of those that can draw attention to the plight of their people and their struggle for mere survival. It is also very important that the Afar Diaspora in developed countries play its expected role in bringing the help that is needed to their sisters and brothers at home.

Development

More than 70% of the Afar population in the Horn of Africa is still semi-nomadic, moving from one place to another following the rare rainfalls that hopefully bring grass to the herds. The Afar pastoralists are experts of the eco-system, and they can give advice to politicians on how to live in harmony with nature. They have, again and again in their daily lives, showed their genius in sustainable ecological livelihood.

Repeated droughts, which partially have their roots in natural climatic change, and the lack of grass and water, often lead to the mass death of livestock – the only wealth and social insurance the Afar pastoralists ever depended on since time immemorial. When their animals die, due to the lack of alternative ways of grazing, the most vulnerable among them, children and women, also start dying. For them, in most cases, help arrives too late.

The second factor that contributes to the threat to the Afar way of life is the occupation of fertile grazing soil and water sources by neighbouring ethnic groups with the blessing of the nation states – through so-called state development projects and multinational projects. The prospects of the Afar pastoralists are reduced to finding grass and water in the extreme desert parts of their territory, but even this option is very limited as they can no longer cross the borders between “their” states inherited from European colonialism.

Along the Red Sea coast the people are not allowed to fish for their daily livelihood, which was the natural alternative in the drought period for the Afars living along the coast. Furthermore, the illegal exploitation of natural resources restricts their movement within their traditional grazing areas.

Due to the constant droughts and loss of herds of cattle, in some parts of the Afar triangle pastoralists have at their disposal less than 40% of the livestock compared with the situation of 10 years ago, a fact that is now forcing them to try a new way of life settling in small ghetto towns alongside the main road between Addis-Djibouti and Addis-Assab. They cannot integrate themselves into the new settlements, which are often dominated by non-Afar dwellers from other parts of the country. They cannot get jobs. Sometimes they are disqualified on the ground of their inability to speak the so-called official languages. This is where they are forced to live in extreme and abject poverty. This again draws them into chewing the drug khat and even into prostitution, so far an unknown practice in traditional Afar setting.

When it is clear that the Afar political cadres at home are suffering from the Stockholm syndrome¹, the only hope left for the Afar people subjected to countless human rights abuses, including compulsory relocation, forced labour, land confiscation, murder, torture, rape and cultural rights deprivation, is the role of the Diaspora.

Historically, there are Diaspora groups worldwide who transformed their countries of origin through their political, social and economic activism: Latin American, Chinese and some African Diaspora groups in USA, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic and some African Diaspora groups in Europe, just to name a few of the most known groups. Of course, it is still out of place to compare our small community abroad with such well-organized and deep-rooted settlers. But we can learn much from our neighbours, nearer to home.

One such group is our neighbours belonging to the Tigrean ethnic group in Eritrea and Ethiopia. They formed their own big humanitarian organisations, e.g., *Relief Society of Tigray (REST)*, and *Truck Aid*². Another important organisation and the most powerful one during the Eritrean armed struggle is the *Eritrean Relief Association (ERA)*, which ran full equipped subterranean hospitals in the desert of Sahel, making them independent and capable of curing their injured guerrilla fighters. Both operated among Eritrean and Tigrean refugees in Sudan and the guerrilla fighters in the field during the long years of armed struggle.

Thanks to these organisations, both the *Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)* and the *Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)* raised funds both in Western countries and in oil rich Arab countries in the Middle East. The raised money contributed enormously to the military victory of their respective organisations in the battle field and later to development endeavours of the two states of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Recently we witnessed the important role played by the Somali Diaspora in both the West and the Middle East in the informal humanitarian assistance to the war and famine affected Somalis and the active role they played in inter-Somali peace process.

The Afar Diaspora in the past was also responsive to the plight of their people. In the seventies some Afar groups living in different countries contributed to the political activities that gradually lead to the formation of political parties and guerrilla movements for the first time in Afar history.

For various known reasons the Afar political activism did not lead to the liberation and the unification of the Afar Triangle, but it did contribute to the heightening and enhancing of political consciousness among the Afar nationality members living in the 3 countries that the Afar straddle.

Actually, there are also a few known Afar NGOs fighting against all odds to improve the life of the Afar people in the areas where it is possible for them to operate. This is not enough, however; as these NGOs are not economically independent, they have to rely on financiers. There are also some western-based solidarity organisations that are actively contributing to the distinguished work of the domestic Afar NGOs.

Conclusion

Seeing the status quo of the Afar society, which is on the brink of extinction, the limited resources of our NGOs and the negligence of the so-called governments, it is time for the Afar Diaspora, especially in the Western countries, to discuss this burning issue and to come to a common understanding. Even with the meagre resources that are at their disposal, they can contribute both by rising the awareness of the plight of their people and by channelling funds to this end. The Afar people expect much from its Diaspora. For those Afars in the Diaspora who are interested of supporting the positive transformation of the Afar society, there is a possibility to be active in some committed humanitarian organisations such as the one I myself represent – Afar Friends in Sweden – operating from Europe and whose assistance is not limited to a specific place in the Afar society but is working actively in all the three countries in which the Afar people is living, to empower the Afar people and help them become masters of their own destiny. I hope and think we can play our part, to help our people in their time of need.

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- 1 Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response sometimes seen in an abducted hostage, in which the hostage shows signs of loyalty to the hostage-taker, regardless of the danger (or at least the risk) in which they have been placed. The syndrome is named after the Norrmalmstorg robbery of Kreditbanken at Norrmalmstorg, Stockholm, Sweden, in which the bank robbers held bank employees hostage from August 23 to August 28 in 1973. In this case, the victims became emotionally attached to their victimizers, and even defended their captors after they were freed from their six-day ordeal. The term Stockholm syndrome was coined by the criminologist and psychiatrist Nils Bejerot, who assisted the police during the robbery, and referred to the syndrome in a news broadcast.*
- 2** Together with one British woman, Kirsty Wright, some Tigreans living in London created an organisation with the name *Truck Aid* and organized the purchase of the first second-hand trucks in London in the late 1970's, which today is the vast Ethiopian trucking company that owns hundreds of trucks.