

**THE ERITREAN REFUGEE PROBLEMS IN THE SUDAN
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES.**

By

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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

1. Introduction

Uprooted, often powerless to influence his fate, torn between the hope of return, which makes him a perpetual wanderer, and the desire to integrate himself in the society which is sheltering him so as to become something other than a recipient of aid, an alien without any protection other than that of the High Commissioner - valuable as it is - the refugee remains a fragile being, whose chances of self development are cruelly jeopardised, even on the assumption - often theoretical - that his material needs would be looked after.¹

The situation of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan has never been good and their survival conditions have immensely deteriorated in the last few years. This year things have hit rock bottom. Due to the critical food shortage an estimated population of 60,000 refugees will face starvation.² Unless external intervention reverses the current trend, the number will eventually double. Even by UNHCR's admission some 40,000 refugees in the settlements are in critical state.

2. The Root Causes

Eritrea became an Italian colony in 1890. Following the defeat of Italy by the Allied Forces in 1941, Eritrea fell under British occupation. In 1950, UN resolution 390 A (v) created the Eritrea-Ethiopia federation against the expressed will of the Eritrean people. When Ethiopia abrogated the federal status and annexed Eritrea, the Eritreans resorted to armed struggle in 1961. Since then marked the beginning of the refugee problem.

The gross violation of human rights and indiscriminate Ethiopian military repressions in the urban centres and areas where the *ERITREAN* national Liberation movement is operating resulted in massive influxes of refugees into the Sudan at different periods. Although war and political persecution are the major causes underlying the flight of refugees, drought, famine and starvation on a massive scale is also another primary cause.

In fact it is not only Eritreans that flee from Ethiopia, but other nationalities too. In Tigrayans, Oromos, Somalis and others are seeking either independence from the Ethiopian state or greater control of their region within a democratic federated republic. However, the government's response has

¹ From L Tindemans as quoted by: Kibreab G (1987): Refugees and Development in Africa, Red Sea Press, New Jersey, p.p. 3.

² CERA(1990): A Call For International Action To Assist Returnees in Eritrea. Khartoum. pp2

been brutal repression and military offensives consequently the influx of refugees continues to the present day.

3. Eritrean Refugees in The Sudan

The first influx of the Eritrean refugees occurred in March 1967 when 28,600 refugees crossed into the Sudan following an attack launched by the Ethiopian army against the areas where the Eritrean Liberation Front was operating. The number of Eritrean refugees has continued to grow since then, and in 1990 an estimated 450,000 Eritrean refugees are in the Sudan.

Sudanese assistance policy is based on placing refugees in organised settlements. The government's generous settlement policy has made large areas of agricultural land available to refugees. Although the Eritrean refugees are scattered throughout the country, the Kassala Province in the eastern region has the highest concentration. The refugees are found both in the rural and urban areas. Out of the 450,000 Eritrean refugees 78% (351,000) have settled spontaneously in the urban areas and the rest are mostly in the organised settlements and some scattered all over the Sudan.

TABLE 1.

Distribution of Refugees in the Urban Areas 1989

<u>City</u>	<u>Number</u>
Kassala	94,770
Gedaref	63,180
Port Sudan	107,055
Khartoum	<u>85,995</u>
	351,000

Source: Kibreab Gaim (1989) Sudan's Refugee Policy and It's Settlement" Unpublished research paper.

The table shows the overwhelming majority of Eritrean refugees are in Eastern Sudan. Moreover less than 100,000 Eritrean refugees are directly assisted by UNHCR. However, UNHCR supports numerous projects with the objective of strengthening the infrastructure in those locations where large concentrations of unassisted Eritreans live.

UNHCR sources indicate at the end of 1988, there were 745,000 refugees in the Sudan. Of these 379,000 were assisted in settlements and reception centre as follows: 350,000 Ethiopians (includes Eritreans), 24000 Chadians and 5,000 Ugandans. Self settled and unassisted refugees were estimated at 366,000 persons, comprising some 310,000 Ethiopians, 46,000 Chadians, 5,000 Ugandians and 5,000 Zaireans. Sudanese government estimates indicate that the number of spontaneously settled Ethiopians may be substantially higher.

UNHCR has responded to the needs of refugee affected areas by funding projects pertaining to agriculture, water supply, education, health etc. Source of funding are numerous international organisations and NGO's.

Despite the relentless efforts made by host governments and by agencies catering for the well-being of Eritrean refugees, there are still grey areas in which no satisfactory results have been achieved. Even though the factors underlying the difficulties may vary from one situation to the other, it is possible to identify some general problems that need to be overcome. In countries like the Sudan, assistance policy is based on placing refugees in organised settlements. This is considered by the government as the most appropriate strategy through which assistance could be provided. Despite the government's decision, however, only 25% of the Eritrean refugees are accommodated in such settlements. The settlements were established to provide refugees with a means of existence so that they would become economically self-sufficient. But to-date very limited results have been achieved and most of the settlements have been dependent for their survival on international assistance. Most settlements are not yet viable because:

- 1) inadequate international assistance;
- 2) fragility of the country's social and economic infrastructures;
- 3) wrong site selection;
- 4) inefficient project planning and implementation;
- 5) shortage of agriculturally suitable land;
- 6) shortage of skilled manpower which can be allocated to the refugee sector without diverting resources from the country's own needs;
- 7) lack of clarity of government policy, and
- 8) lack of institutional capacity to cope with the magnitude of the problem.

These have, in turn, biased donor responses. In spite of the fact that thousands of Eritrean refugees are self-settled and unassisted in the urban areas, the government has no policy which regulates their conditions. This has resulted in the marginalisation of urban refugees who are faced with immense difficulties in the spheres of employment, housing, health and education. The lack of policy is also aggravating problems of protection by creating conditions for some groups or individuals to engage in blackmail and harassment of the self-settled refugees in the urban areas.

UNHCR sources reveal that the government of Sudan owes WFP 120,000 MT of dura for refugee relief purposes. However given the country's overall food shortage and drought situation it is highly unlikely that GOS will honour its obligation. In fact GOS is in the process of implementing institutionalised food distribution system throughout Sudan. Access to this food rations system normally demands possession of identity documents which generally refugees do not have. Hence,

refugees are automatically excluded from this system of food rationing. The only alternative open for refugees is to purchase food and other basic commodities in the black market. The prices however are exorbitant, thus beyond the reach of most refugees. The issues are accessibility and affordability.

Expected harvest in land settlements is extremely poor and there is no employment to speak of in the wage earning settlements and among urban refugees.

Sudan is among the least developed countries in the world. It is also hosting thousands of refugees which exacerbate its economic hardship. In light of this, is integration of the Eritrean refugees into the Sudanese society feasible? The answer is certainly no. The reasons are:

- 1) The refugees dream and hope to return to Eritrea in safety and dignity and not to integrate into Sudanese communities. Exile for Eritrean refugees irrespective of its duration, is perceived as a transitory phenomenon;
- 2) The government of Sudan does not have any intention of allowing Eritrean refugees to integrate into its society. The Sudan has one of the most ambitious refugee settlement programme, but these are only designed to enable refugees to achieve self-reliance until their voluntary repatriation becomes possible. The Sudanese nationals, despite their initial generous responses are manifesting some sense of "compassion fatigue". There is adequate evidence which shows that the local population is accepting refugees on the assumption that they would return to their country of origin;
- 3) Even if we assume that both the nationals and host government were willing to accept refugees to become part of their societies permanently and the refugees were in favour of integration, the structural imbalance of the economy would not allow this to happen. In other words, the absorbing capacity of the economy is so limited that the majority of the nationals are even finding difficulties in earning their livelihood.

4. International Response to the Refugee Problem

Most international efforts have concentrated on seeking solutions to the Eritrean refugee problem within the context of exile. Addressing the root cause of the problem i.e. war, was either considered as laying outside the areas of concern of the refugee agencies or was relegated to the background.

In the situation that prevailed after WW II this approach produced satisfactory results in which millions of persons who were uprooted became part of the greater societies culturally, socially, economically and politically. Post WW II refugees were of European origin and whose emergence was immediately followed by high economic growth rates in a context of depleted populations. However, the period in which African

refugee problem became acute, is characterised by unprecedented problem of recession on a global scale.

Sudan is in the grip of grave economic crisis manifested in fragile social and physical infrastructure, high unemployment, a high national debt, and high population growth. As a result, it is unable to meet the basic needs of their own population let alone refugees.

To date very few Eritrean refugees have been resettled in America, Europe or Australia. CERA estimates of an estimated 600,000 Eritrean refugees world wide less than 40,000 have been resettled in third countries. Australia has taken around 400 Eritrean refugees to date.

Serious attempts to eliminate the root and immediate cause of refugee inflow and repatriation of refugees and re-integrating them into their society should be the thrust of all concerned governments and international organisations.

5. Voluntary Repatriation of Eritreans

Eritrean refugees have begun to return home. Both "push" and "pull" factors are involved in the repatriation process. The drastic changes in the political and economic situation in the host country are strong push factors. In the home front the rapid change in the military balance in favour of EPLF has acted as a full factor motivating many Eritrean refugees to return home.

April 1989 to September 1990, 1442 households returned to Eritrea. Of these 235 HH (16.3%) were repatriated through semi official and organised way with the participation of the Sudanese Commission For Refugee Affairs, UNHCR, and CERA (Commission For Eritrean Refugees Affairs). The rest (1207) returned spontaneously and without external assistance.

Assistance measures to repatriating refugees are very limited. UNHCR could only assist returnees up to the border and was unable to provide assistance for rehabilitation process inside Eritrea. All what UNHCR provided was a truck to transport refugees and their possessions up to the Sudan-Eritrea border and a month's relief supply consisting of dura, cooking oil and some basic kitchen utensils.

According to Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs' estimates it will require US\$5000 per household (av. of 6 persons) to suitably cover the cost of basic relief commodities over a three month period plus the cost of rehabilitation and re-integration of returnees. Basic items of rehabilitation include: farm tools, seeds, oxen, pack animals, tents. When these components are missing in a repatriation programme, the burden on the home country is simply incalculable. The more so when Eritrea is run by a liberation front like EPLF lacking official aid.

6. Prospects For the Future

If local integration of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan is impossible and the opportunity for a significant resettlement in other countries does not exist, what is to be done? UNHCR, CERA and others emphasise voluntary repatriation, however, this will really be possible only if there is a peaceful solution to the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. A cessation of war is essential.

All the major opposition fronts in Ethiopia recognise the Eritrean right to self determination and independence. The EPLF supports the aspirations to self-determination of the nationalities within Ethiopia and recognises that a lasting peaceful solution to the Eritrean conflict depends on the democratic resolution of the national question in Ethiopia. Some of the fronts in Ethiopia have acquired considerable arms, have widespread support from the local population and the TPLF even administers the whole of Tigray. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, the Western Somali Liberation Front, The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front differ over the geographical extent of the respective national domains and over final objectives, the development of a single programme and a unified opposition is likely to take time.

Demoralisation and dissent within the Ethiopian military is growing as the EPLF continues to score dramatic military victories and the demands for a peaceful solution are becoming more voice-ferrous. Many attempts at peace talks so far have failed because the Dergue talks in order to buy time in the hope of changing the balance of forces in its favour.

At the initiative of former US president J. Carter, in May 1990 the EPLF and Ethiopian government representatives met in Atlanta and later in Nairobi to resolve the problem, however the two parties could not agree on many issues and the talks are stalled.

The EPLF believes that at the moment there are no conceivable circumstances in which the enemy can change the prevailing balance of forces. The Ethiopian military power and economy is being progressively depleted, reducing its capacity to regain lost positions or resist EPLF's advance.

After the fall of Massawa in April 1990, the Dergue launched a series of desperate military operations to try and break through EPLF's defences. But all the operations have failed and the EPLF is now in the brink of launching the final offensive, win the war and declare independence.

7. AUSTCARE's Role in Eritrea

As a Programme Officer of AUSTCARE it is appropriate for me to mention the support that AUSTCARE provides to refugees and internally displaced Eritreans.

AUSTCARE is Australia's refugee and displaced persons assistance specialist non-government organisation. AUSTCARE provides emergency assistance and supports long term development projects in refugee affected countries of Asia and Africa.

AUSTCARE has a long standing involvement with the ERA both for assistance to Eritrean refugees and for assistance to affected people and displacees inside Eritrea.

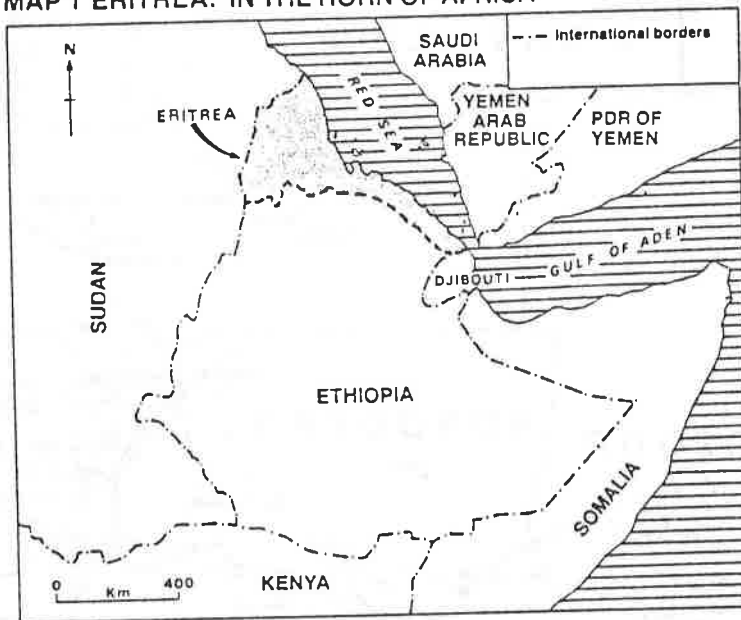
AUSTCARE provided in excess of \$1.3 million dollars to Eritrea in the immediate aftermath of the 1984/5 famine, to Eritrean refugees and affected people inside Eritrea. A significant portion of these funds had been AIDAB funding channelled through AUSTCARE.

Since 1986 AUSTCARE has contributed A\$1,115,313 to ERA as follows:

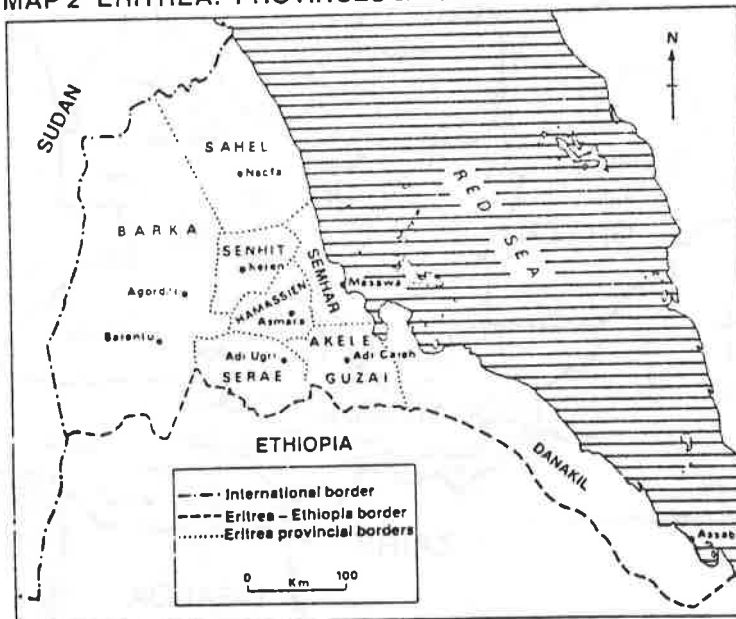
	AMOUNT
<u>1986</u>	144,384
<u>1987</u>	108,215
<u>1988</u>	192,714
<u>1989</u>	50,000
<u>1990</u>	620,000

This assistance has been for community health care emergency medical supplies, agricultural rehabilitation, and orphaned children. However, recently AUSTCARE has focused on assistance to the health sector providing both emergency medical supplies and support for ERA's primary health care programmes and Blindness Prevention Programme.

MAP 1 ERITREA: IN THE HORN OF AFRICA



MAP 2 ERITREA: PROVINCES & TOWNS



SUDAN

Area.....2,505,813 sq. km
 Estimated population.....22,180,000 (mid-84)
 Population density.....Approx. 8.9 per sq.km
 Rainy season.....East: July-October
 South: April-October

