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# Refugees in the Horn of Africa\*

## Political Factors Contributing to the Generation of Refugees in the Horn of Africa

by Peter Woodward

The exposure by the mass media of the conditions of refugees in eastern Sudan and of camps of displaced people in northern Ethiopia in October 1984 first alerted the world at large to the extent of the famine in that area. But clearly the problem is more complex than most people then realized, for in the Horn, refugees, famine and politics are inextricably linked.

Northeast Africa has the biggest concentration of refugees in the world. The largest single group are those from Eritrea and Tigre living in eastern Sudan, followed by the people of Haud and Ogaden regions of Ethiopia who have sought refuge in Somalia and Djibouti. In Ethiopia there are also opponents of Somalia's government and refugees from the southern Sudan. In addition there are Ethiopian refugees in Kenya, Ugandan refugees in the southern Sudan, and refugees from Chad in western Sudan. The one generalization that can be made is that they are all escaping from conditions in which political conflict is as significant as environmental degradation and famine.

It would be the contention of most host governments that refugees originate in the peripheries of the states involved. But the refugees themselves see their relationships to the states from which they have fled as far more complex. For example, people from the Haud and Ogaden regions of Ethiopia, who regard themselves as Somalis, would like to see the boundary of Somalia redrawn in such a way as to incorporate them in that country, a view which is encouraged by Somalia and which contributed to the Somali attack on Ethiopia in 1977. The Eritreans, on the other hand, are less concerned with boundary changes than with their claim for an independent state of Eritrea, while the Tigrean movement seeks greater regional autonomy within a reformed Ethiopia.

But "periphery" is not solely a geographical concept. Groups may be socially and politically marginalized in ways that contribute to the generation of refugees. For example, the Oromos of Ethiopia are the largest single group in that country and come from a wide area in the south and east. Still they are discriminated against by the Shoa Amhars and this has played a large part in the migration of some of their number.

Tension in the region may in part be blamed on the arbitrary borders bequeathed by colonialism, especially in the case of Somalia, but often the opposition movements do not regard inappropriate borders as the heart of their problems. For them the origins lie more in the discrimination which peoples of regions have suffered at the hands of their government. Yet their suffering is not only the result of developments in their own country, but also must be seen in the wider international setting. For instance, the strategic importance of the Horn to the Middle East has meant that both Middle Eastern states and the superpowers have become involved. All too often outside powers have exacerbated tension by supporting guerrilla movements or one government against another.

There are numerous examples of the international exploitation of peripheral groups in the Horn. Libya's "radical" activities have included support for the Sudan People's Liberation Army, as a result of President Qaddafi's opposition to ex-President Numeiri, while the southern Sudanese have also been assisted by Israel as part of its anti-Arab activities. In turn, a number of Arab states have aided the Eritrean Liberation Front, the first guerrilla movement in northern Ethiopia. The superpowers have also provided military aid to a number of governments in the region, enabling them to meet opposition with force, particularly in Ethiopia.

Leaving broader international rivalries aside for the moment, relations between neighbouring states are central to the problems which have generated refugees in the Horn.

For the most part, African states have accepted their post-colonial boundaries, though this has not been the case in the Horn, especially with Somalia. The popular territorial ambitions of the Somali people in general, including those living in areas of northern Kenya, and the areas of Haud and Ogaden in Ethiopia, increased tension throughout the region and contributed to the attack upon Ethiopia in 1977-78. Ethiopia repulsed the invasion, but not before a large number of refugees fled to Somalia.

Somalia's active pursuit of boundary changes is relatively unusual, though Idi Amin made highly imaginative claims to his neighbours' territories, and it was an incursion by his troops into northern Tanzania that provided the *casus belli* for the Tanzanian-led invasion of Uganda which brought about his downfall. Also, the Sudan-Ethiopia border has been in dispute on a number of occasions during the past twenty years, and at present, with refugees of both countries on either side, it is once again a source of tension between the two countries.

The presence of refugees creates serious tensions within recipient countries. Economically, the management of refugees is likely to be far beyond the capacity of the host community, especially since border areas are, for reasons of domestic economy, often amongst the least-developed areas. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and a number of other agencies have given large amounts of aid to refugees, but this may only exacerbate local tension. For instance, the short-term aid provided for refugees may not be available to the local population who may, as in eastern Sudan in 1984-85, be in similarly desperate circumstances. Likewise, longer-term refugee aid may include resettlement, and this will impinge on local economic resources. The economic distortion that huge refugee communities can produce has been particularly obvious in recent years in Somalia; and recently in eastern Sudan, there have been several incidents of tension resulting from competition for scarce services, especially in such fields as education and health care.

Politically, too, the presence of refugees can generate a range of unexpected problems. Even if refugees accept their new status and resettle, they are likely to affect local, regional and even national political developments, as has become particularly evident in Somalia. Similarly, following the downfall of Amin in 1979, refugees from Uganda have had an impact on Equatorial politics in the Sudan.

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\* The articles by Peter Woodward, Mary Dines and Taha Abdi were commissioned by the Refugee Studies Programme for the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, which has agreed to their publication in *Refugee*.

Further, refugees usually feel involved in the political issues that gave rise to their exile, and this often leads to their support of guerrilla movements. Many men from the Western Somali Liberation Front, for instance, left their families in camps in Somalia and returned to the struggle in the Haud and Ogaden, even after the Somali defeat in 1978. Similarly, Ethiopia has frequently alleged that the refugee camps in eastern Sudan harbour its enemies from Eritrea, Tigre and Wollo.

It is a short step from these allegations to accusations that neighbouring states are condoning and perhaps even encouraging subversive activities. Ethiopia has accused not only Somalia and the Sudan but also a number of other Arab states. Similarly, the Sudan and Somalia have made counter-accusations about guerrilla movements in southern Sudan and northern Somalia.

In northeast Africa in general there have indeed been a number of interventions in the affairs of neighbouring states, sometimes connected with refugees. Tanzania's army backed the Ugandan refugees returning home after the overthrow of Amin; Libya, the Sudan and Egypt have all backed factions in Chad, some of which had sought refuge in their territory; and the Sudan condoned and sometimes encouraged guerrilla forces in northern Ethiopia. In turn, Ethiopia (and Libya) backed the Sudan People's Liberation Army in southern Sudan, some of whose members had fled there from 1983 onwards. But of course the most aggressive external attack was that launched by Somalia against Ethiopia in 1977, allegedly in support of the Western Somalis from the Ogaden who had taken refuge in Somalia.

Intervention need not always be aggressive; one country may become involved with another in order to prop up a regime with which it has friendly ties.

Still, such defensive interventions may do as much to encourage conflicts, which contribute to the generation of refugees, as more offensive intervention. This is particularly the case when the intervention gives the supported government, as in the Sudan, the confidence as well as the financial and military ability to repress marginalized groups, in that case, the southern Sudanese in the early 1980s.

While relations between neighbouring states are a significant factor in the conditions that have generated refugees in northeast Africa, there are two further political factors of consequence: regional politics and superpower rivalry.

Historically there has been rivalry and tension between Christianity and Islam in the Horn, with Ethiopia traditionally regarded as a bastion of anti-Islamic power. More recently, Middle East conflicts have had an impact on the area, with Israel first actively supporting Haile Selassie, and subsequently the Marxist regime against their common Arab enemy. Arab involvement in the Horn came first through the rival revolutionary activities of the Syrians and Iraqis, who at various times have given financial and military expression to their solidarity with the Eritreans.

Although Arab and Israeli involvement has become a factor in the Horn, it is not decisive. The Eritreans in particular are not overly dependent on their Arab supporters, nor are the Israelis the major backers of Ethiopia. Instead, superpower rivalry is the most significant factor in the polarization of political relations in the Horn.

The growing US and Soviet involvement has contributed most to the polarization of the region and led to the initial international response to the 1984-85 famine, notably to the criticism cast on the Ethiopian, Soviet-backed leadership. Still, it would be too easy to think that their presence makes superpowers the dominant forces in the area. This is not the case, for none of the leaders in the Horn is a puppet of the superpowers. In addition, neither Washington nor Moscow has been able to determine domestic policy in the region.

The political bases of refugee-generating conflicts are thus varied and complex and involve overlapping interests between domestic forces, neighbouring states, Middle Eastern states and the superpowers. Each of these political forces has a degree of autonomy and a degree of dependence: while they influence each other, none has the absolute power simply to dictate to others. Knowledgeable observers of these various conflicts frequently conclude that given the improbability of achieving military solutions, and the prospect of the continuation or even the worsening of the situation, some attempt to bring international pressure to bear to encourage negotiation would be highly desirable. Yet it follows from the above remarks that any dialogue would need to be between individual states and their internal opponents and could not be dictated from the outside. Until such time as permanent solutions are found, it is the people of the Horn who will suffer. Irrespective of the rains and crops, the refugee crisis will continue.

## News Digest

- The next volume of *Refuge* will start with a Special Issue partly devoted to Bill C-55 on amendments to the Immigration Act. Articles and commentaries in the Forum section will discuss the implications of the proposals. There will also be a comprehensive section on the refugee and asylum situation in the United States. Publication is anticipated for August/September 1987.
- The Working Group for Refugee Women, Canadian Council for Refugees, is conducting a literature review of studies on Refugee Women. Many studies are difficult to locate because they are subsumed under larger research documents. If you have written a report or prepared a bibliography, please call or write to Noreen Nimmons at the Refugee Documentation Project, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3, or telephone (416) 736-5061, extension 3639.
- The editor and staff of *Refuge* would be pleased to consider articles for possible inclusion in future editions. Articles should focus on refugee issues and situations, including government policy and social action, and be properly documented in standard scholarly format and presentation. Please mail your submission to the Managing Editor of *Refuge* (c/o Refugee Documentation Project, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3) and enclose a brief precis of the article.

## New Publications

- David Matas, *Canadian Immigration Law* (Ottawa, Canadian Bar Association, 1987). Matas stresses that "it is more important to refugee claimants than to anyone else that they know the law".
- *Review '86: Outlook '87* (Ottawa: North South Institute, 1987). This annual review focuses on foreign policy, human rights, and Canada's own foreign policy with respect to international challenges.
- *World Refugee Survey: 1986 In Review* (Washington: US Committee for Refugees, 1987). Carries an excellent collection of statistics on refugees and internally displaced peoples and "cameos" of refugee-producing countries.