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# Eritrean Refugees

by Mary Dines

The ex-Italian colony of Eritrea was established as an autonomous state by the United Nations after the Second World War and, although Ethiopia wanted to annex it, a federation of the two states was created in 1952. From that time onward Eritrea's autonomy was under attack and on November 14, 1962 its federal status was abolished. It was the failure of the UN to take action then that has led to the twenty-five year war between Eritreans and Ethiopians. And it is this war that has been responsible for the most serious refugee situation in the Sudan. It has also been a major cause of the Ethiopian famine of 1983-84, and in spite of reasonable rains since, Eritrea is likely to remain acutely short of food.

There are about a half-million Eritrean refugees in the Sudan alone. About one-fifth are congregated in refugee camps run by the UNHCR in the eastern Sudan and the rest are mainly unregistered refugees living in Khartoum, Port Sudan, Gedaref and other towns in the north. There are at least another hundred thousand Eritreans in the Middle East, Europe and North America.

Refugees are a barometer of the war in Eritrea. Although there is a continuous flow of families and individuals into the Sudan from Eritrean towns under Ethiopian occupation, the major exoduses have coincided with Ethiopian attacks on civilian areas. During the Haile Selassie era there were major flights in 1967 and 1970, and, since the military coup, the war has escalated into a major conflict, with massive movements of refugees in 1975, 1979 and 1982. In 1984-85 eighty thousand Eritreans fled to the Sudan. It has become common practice to refer to this group as "drought victims", but this is an oversimplification. Eritrea has been subjected to periodic droughts for many years; since the early 1970s the rains have been erratic in many areas. In spite of

this, had peace prevailed it would have been possible for Eritreans to make provision for bad years by developing the considerable agricultural potential of the country.

Within Eritrea there is widespread displacement of the population. Since the late 1970s people living in villages near towns garrisoned by Ethiopian troops or along the main roads linking Ethiopian army bases have had to flee from the major towns following the arrest or killing of individual family members. The effects of war have been particularly harsh for the pastoralists. Traditional grazing land has been subjected to bombardment and nomadic caravans have been attacked. In some rural areas, whole settlements have been burnt to the ground. The threat of air attacks has prevented small farmers, who eke out only a marginal existence, from ploughing, planting and harvesting.

The impoverishment of the civilian population by the war has been greatly exacerbated by periods of low rainfall that have affected all parts of Eritrea, culminating in the most recent, almost total drought. In many areas, water sources completely dried up and thousands of animals died. Whole communities were forced to leave their homes in search of food. Many found their way to the refugee camps in the Sudan.

A survey carried out in 1979 showed that virtually all of the refugees would return to Eritrea if that were possible. They would clearly be better off if they were able to return to their home areas and get on with the business of developing their land and improving their standard of living. In addition, their return would lift a burden from the Sudanese government. The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), an indigenous group founded in 1976 and working in co-operation with the Eritrean

Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), has already prepared a repatriation programme based on settling returnees in agricultural areas where they will have access to land, tools, seeds and training.

Already the ERA has tried to enable displaced persons to stay in their home areas rather than be forced to seek asylum in the Sudan. Their first camp for displaced civilians, Solomuna, was set up in 1977; at the same time, a boarding school, Zero, for unaccompanied children was established. Both have been forced by bombing to change locations on a number of occasions, yet both have developed into integrated communities. Further, schools and camps have since been established by the ERA, attempting to create new communities rather than places in which people can be *parked* until the situation improves. Success requires careful selection of sites with a continuous supply of water. Many of the camps have agricultural facilities, and since Eritrea has a high proportion of qualified doctors, scientists and mechanics in the "liberated areas", these people have organized training programmes in order to pass on essential skills. For instance, mechanics have been trained to repair and maintain the ERA's fleet of trucks which transport food and other necessary goods to the displaced population.

On a number of occasions representatives of the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean people have met to discuss ways to end the fighting. So far, these meetings have been unsuccessful. Now what is needed is an initiative from an independent third party who can foster negotiations between the government and the EPLF. Until such time, Eritreans will continue to flow into the Sudan and the Eritreans' hope to make the "liberated areas" into economically viable regions will be doomed to failure.