

NEWSFLASH:

The UNHCR has cancelled its agreement of cooperation with the Canadian Foundation for Refugees.

From Djibouti to Quebec

by Scott Mullin

An incident in which Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti were said to have been returned to Ethiopia against their will received considerable publicity throughout the past spring and summer. Here, Mr. Scott Mullin, one of Canada's immigration officers stationed in Africa, describes what happened and Canada's role in the events.

Djibouti achieved independence from France in 1977. A small country wedged between Ethiopia, Somalia and the Red Sea, Djibouti has virtually no natural resources and depends on its strategic location and good port facilities for virtually all of its economic activity. Its location has also resulted in its having to deal with over 35,000 Ethiopian refugees. The refugees represent an extraordinary 10% of Djibouti's population and have placed enormous strains on the country's undeveloped economy. The influx of refugees has also created security concerns for the authorities as Djibouti depends heavily on trade with Ethiopia for its economic, and political, survival. At the time of the international discussion preceding its independence, there was a great deal of debate over whether the French Territory of the Issas and Afars, as it was known then, would become independent or be absorbed by either one of its two neighbours, Ethiopia or Somalia. Djibouti has a population which is largely ethnic Somali and the well-known dispute in the Horn of Africa has placed Djibouti in a complex and difficult relationship with its neighbours.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and voluntary agencies active in Djibouti soon appreciated that it was necessary to use overseas resettlement as one of the solutions to the refugee problem in the country. While the vast majority of the refugees were nomadic peasants who were living in the rural areas of Djibouti, there were between 2,000 and 3,000 urban refugees for whom resettlement abroad seemed the only appropriate solution. At the request of the UNHCR Canada has been dealing with refugee applicants from Djibouti since 1980. At one time the United States ran a large-scale resettlement program from Djibouti but it was ended in early 1982. Canada now remains the only country prepared

to accept applicants for resettlement from Djibouti. Sixty-five Ethiopian refugees have gone to Canada so far this year, and perhaps another 35-50 are expected to leave before Christmas.

In February of this year the Djibouti government, which is also plagued with a large number of illegal aliens in the country, conducted a series of raids in the capital designed to locate such aliens with a view to deporting them to their country of origin. In the confusion that followed there were allegations that Ethiopian refugees had been included in the round-up and that some had been returned against their will to Ethiopia. A senior UNHCR official from Geneva was dispatched to Djibouti and received assurances from the authorities that it had not been and was not their intention to expel any refugees.

As a result of the intervention of UNHCR, nine Ethiopians, among a large group of illegal aliens in trucks on their way to the Ethiopian border, were intercepted and identified. It seems reasonable to believe that confusion had resulted in their

inclusion in a group being deported, but the nine became "proof" of the allegations that some refugees may have been sent back. The nine were detained by the Djibouti authorities who were clearly embarrassed by their presence in Djibouti. As a result of the incident relations between UNHCR and the Djibouti government became strained and the future of the nine refugees became a source of irritation and frustration to both sides.

When the situation was explained to us, it was decided that Canada could greatly assist in resolving a difficult problem and could ensure the future safety and security of the nine by agreeing to immediately resettle them. None of the nine spoke English or French and several were illiterate, but it was decided that their security was of paramount concern and that all nine would be accepted under our refugee resettlement program. In view of their detention and the serious strains the situation had created, it was decided to immediately arrange for their resettlement. Through the use of Minister's Permits, usual processing requirements were temporarily waived, and through the participation of the Service d'Immigration du Quebec (SIQ), it was ensured that the refugees would be dealt with as cases requiring more than usual government assistance. This facilitated their quick departure as it would have been very inappropriate to have waited for private sponsorships to materialize. The nine refugees were resettled in Quebec less than two weeks after they were interviewed in an isolated camp near the Ethiopia-Djibouti border.

Both the Djibouti government and the UNHCR expressed their sincere thanks for Canada's efforts on behalf of the group and both commented that our decision to accept the nine refugees resulted in a marked drop in the tension and frustrations their presence had caused in Djibouti.

Djibouti,
in the midst of the Horn of Africa

