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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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.

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.

The Plight of the Oromo Refugees in the Horn of Africa

by Taha Abdi

The History of the Oromo people of Ethiopia is one of colonization, subjugation and decimation. In fact, the first refugees on record in the Horn were Oromos who left their homeland during the early period of Ethiopian occupation. Annexation by Ethiopia meant the loss of their main source of livelihood, the land, and the denial of the most basic human and national rights. The situation prompted frequent armed uprisings, which have become more organized in recent years. Conflict, political persecution, and the inept and destructive policies of the Ethiopian government have now displaced hundreds of thousands of Oromos. These people live either in the safe area within the Oromos' region, occupied by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), or in the neighbouring states of Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, the Sudan and beyond.

The major cause of displacement is the scorched-earth policy of the Ethiopian government, aimed at suppressing the Oromo people and taking control of the land wherever opposition is suspected. Though this policy has led to Oromo uprisings, which have been cruelly put down, it has been more evident since 1976 when the Oromo liberation struggle resumed. The policy includes the confiscation of property of both individuals and communities suspected of acts of sympathy or support for the Oromo liberation forces. Villages and crops are burnt, women and girls are raped, livestock and people are machine-gunned. Between mid-1984 and 1985 alone, measures taken by the Ethiopians in the Hrarghe drove more than 100,000 Oromos out of the region and to the safety of the Somali Democratic Republic. Many others remained inside the country, in the areas under the control of the OLF.

Fear of persecution is another major cause of displacement. Indeed, Ethiopia has become notorious for imprisoning without trial suspected supporters of the nationalist movements or opponents of government policies. In Ethiopia, where prisons are as numerous as schools and clinics, cases of torture, executions and disappearances have been well-documented.

Another cause of the Oromo exodus is conscription. In recent years, the government has introduced the draft for men between the ages of eighteen and thirty. After a short period

of training, they are sent to fight their own people or taken to other parts of the country to fight against other resistance movements. Many avoid conscription and possibly death by fleeing the country.

The forceful evacuation of Oromos from their traditional homeland to "protected hamlets" is deeply resented by the peasantry and is another cause of their flight. Forced resettlement of Oromos is motivated by the government's desire to separate the people from the Oromo liberation forces. Similarly, their forced collectivization and cultural harassment (by such programmes as the literacy campaign in which people are forced to learn Amharic), increase resentment and encourage people to leave.

Last but not least among the causes of displacement is the resettlement of the Tigre from the north. Moving northerners into the Oromo homeland and employing them as an arm of state security is a policy begun by Emperor Menelik, but institutionalized and extended by Haile Selassie. The current government hoped to move at least 1.5 million people from the same area under the pretext of drought-created famine. In an attempt to finance the project through international relief funds, the Settlement Authority merged with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission in 1980. One of the reasons that the government allowed the recent famine to reach catastrophic proportions was its desire to create large numbers of helpless participants for the resettlement scheme as well as to attract additional funding. But, try as it might, the government has not been able to reach its resettlement target, mainly because of the paucity of voluntary recruits. Many of those who have been resettled were, in fact, abducted from their home areas. The project has proved to be an economic and social disaster, and most settlers continue to rely on food assistance for years after being resettled.

The resettlement of outsiders into Oromo country has been implemented in the face of strong objections by the Oromos and, more recently, by those being resettled. Almost without exception, this settlement has worsened the plight of the indigenous population. In all cases the best land has been allocated to the new settlers and the Oromos are pushed to less productive areas.

The political motive behind the resettlement scheme -- namely, to denude the north of Ethiopia, particularly Tigre, of people from dissident areas -- is clear. The facts that thousands of children have been orphaned partly as a result of the forced movement, and that thousands have died in the same process have been documented.

The end result is that there are at least 800,000 Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, about half of whom are Oromos. While these people face problems of status determination, the Somali government has been exemplary in maintaining an open-border policy toward displaced Oromos and others, and no refugee has been returned against his/her will by the Somali government. But neither has this government facilitated any voluntary repatriation. Kenya was once a sanctuary for the Oromo, but they are no longer welcome there. Many who settled there earlier have since left and found asylum in the Sudan, walking through Uganda, or in central Africa. In fact, there are several thousand Oromos in the Blue Nile province of the Sudan, where their communities have obtained some degree of self-sufficiency.

Djibouti once assisted the Oromos, but in 1984, (and again in 1986-87) with the implementation of the Tripartite agreement between Ethiopia, Djibouti and the UNHCR, people were returned, in some cases forcibly, to Ethiopia.

Others who faced forced repatriation went on to Somalia, while still others took fishing boats and headed for Saudi Arabia and North Yemen, with varying degrees of success.

Endemic conflict, famine and large-scale displacement in the Horn are the colonial legacy of Ethiopia and a direct consequence of the violence and destructive policies pursued by the Amhara ruling classes. The international donor community, which provides relief assistance to care for the victims of Ethiopian atrocities and incompetence, has a strong moral duty to bring pressure to bear on the Ethiopian government to seek a political solution which takes into account the representatives of the Oromos, the OLF. Until such time as a peaceful, honourable and enduring solution is found, Oromos will continue to fill the refugee camps of the Horn.

Report on the Djibouti Refugee Situation

Background

In 1982-83 as a result of a tripartite agreement between the governments of Djibouti and Ethiopia and the UNHCR, the implementation of a repatriation programme was begun. The voluntary nature of this repatriation was widely questioned. (See Jeff Crisp's "Voluntary Repatriation Programmes for African Refugees: A Critical Examination", *Refugee Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2.) Efforts to pressure refugees to leave the country began again when on July 29, 1986 refugees in Djibouti were issued a circular informing them that they had "no future in a refugee camp nor on Djiboutian soil." It continued by observing that "... the majority of you left your country for reasons which have ceased to exist today and therefore you should no more be considered as refugees." Refugees were reminded that the Ethiopian government had promulgated an amnesty law in favour of all repatriants in 1983.

Refugees were further informed that if anyone did not "accept to repatriate voluntarily", he must "request individually the continuation of his refugee status". Identification cards previously issued were declared no longer valid, and new ones would be issued to those who resolutely refused to repatriate and who passed the re-screening exercise. The circular informed the refugees that a special committee had been established to examine those requests and which would "take decisions rapidly which would not be subject to appeal". Those who passed the re-screening would be moved to a new refugee camp in the region of Obock, a region in which it would not only be impossible for refugees to cultivate land but where they would also be cut off from any other commercial activities that might help them support themselves.

The circular warned that those who refused to repatriate voluntarily and who did not pass the re-screening exercise must immediately leave Djiboutian territory. "They will not receive any assistance of any kind as opposed to those who will repatriate voluntarily. As of January 1, 1987 all old refugee cards, ration cards and asylum seekers' attestations will not be valid anymore." The circular, signed by the Minister of Interior, concluded with the following: "In the meanwhile and with immediate effect all programmes of assistance for resettlement to third countries are suspended."

Several organizations, including the British Refugee Council (BRC), forwarded strong objections to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Although the UNHCR was reportedly successful in persuading the Djibouti government to relent on the issue of resettlement of refugees in a third country, the repatriation programme began.

Is the Repatriation Voluntary?

As in 1982-83, there are contradictory reports from Djibouti concerning the voluntary character of the repatriation. It is very difficult to accept assurances now that the conditions under which refugees must decide whether or not to repatriate, which include the

removal of ration cards, are conducive to voluntary repatriation. Most alarming, as is the case everywhere in Africa, not all refugees are registered and in Djibouti, those who did not have identification cards had no protection, and were removed not as refugees but as "illegal immigrants".

As in 1982-83, over the past few months there have been calls for an independent monitoring of the repatriation. Given the number of disquieting reports from Djibouti one agency did send a staff member to assess the current situation in light of the Government of Djibouti's (GoD) circular. A report was presented to the BRC. As a result of this information, a British parliamentary committee proposed to visit Djibouti, but the Government of Djibouti has declined permission, giving the upcoming elections as the reason.

The report (most of which is reproduced here) emphasizes the reluctance of refugees to repatriate, pointing out:

- The resurgence of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in the last eighteen months and the strength which its operations have gained in the rural areas, have provoked new levels of intolerance of any kind of opposition on the part of the Dergue.

- Many of the political refugees in Djibouti are there because of their own or their relatives' involvement with the activities of the EPRP, or merely because suspicions have been raised against them of such involvement, and the reprisals which they thus incurred are still fresh in their minds. The UNHCR branch office therefore lays itself open to disbelief and ridicule when it echoes the GoD's statements that they have nothing to fear from the Dergue and a full amnesty awaits them. Refugee confidence in the UNHCR is at an all-time low.

- An increase in the generally xenophobic attitude of Djiboutians is easy to detect at the moment, and may be at least partly ascribed to the forthcoming elections. However, it would be a mistake to see the government as a monolith with regard to the refugee situation since many of its members are not native-born Djiboutians but came themselves originally from Ethiopia, and many more are related to the Issa refugees who make up the majority of the Dikhil camp population. From a financial as well as a political point of view the refugees cannot be so easily dismissed: fortunes have been made and continue to be made by those working for ONARS who handle refugee resources and asylum applications.

- The anti-alien atmosphere has recently manifested itself in a series of round-ups of illegal immigrants in Djibouti town. The latest of these resulted on December 29, 1986 in 125 "argos" from Wollo being arrested, beaten and loaded into closed metal containers

on the train and deported. By the time the train reached the border, six had died of suffocation. Although there has been no formal registration of asylum seekers since the government's circular, some of these deportees may have been asylum seekers (ten of them had non-Muslim names and were therefore not "argos"), and refugees in Djibouti report that one of the dead was a registered refugee. It is hoped that the UNHCR is now investigating this claim. Whatever the case, GoD is highly embarrassed about the publicity given to the incident, which has certainly had an adverse effect on the repatriation programme.

Repatriation

There have so far been three repatriation trains, on December 8 and 19, 1986 and January 5, 1987. A total of just over 1,200 people travelled on these trains, and another train was scheduled for January 12th.

The campaign to get people to register for repatriation has been left largely in the hands of the Commissaire of Dikhil, a man well-known for his eccentric and irrational behaviour, and the Dikhil ONARS staff. The Commissaire has made much use of various harassment techniques to convince refugees that they are no longer welcome in Dikhil: he has driven through the camp with a megaphone announcing that all refugees must register, and that any who do not are in Djibouti illegally; he has been seen to slap elderly refugees and abuse them; last December there were frequent visits by parties of soldiers to the camp in the small hours of the morning, opening tents and shouting that people must leave, resulting in refugees spending the nights in the hills surrounding the camp for fear of being forcibly deported; ONARS announced that starting December 31, 1986 (the deadline mentioned on the circular), there would be no more water or rations whereupon the water was shut off in the camp for three days (rations are in any case two months in arrears).

Once registered, refugees do not have the right to change their minds. Five families who did so were visited by the Commissaire with a party of soldiers, who dismantled their aqals amidst much verbal abuse, and the Commissaire, hitting anything in range with his stick, loaded them and their belongings onto a truck, and took them off to catch the train.

Asylum seekers and political refugees have also received much "encouragement" to repatriate. Several asylum seekers have registered voluntarily (fourteen of whom are reported to have left the train and headed for Somalia), but one man who spoke out against the methods being used was forcibly registered and was due

to be repatriated on January 12th unless the UNHCR intervened. Several political refugees received papers "convoking" them to appear at the repatriation office to register, and when they presented themselves and refused to register, were told that they should inform the rest of their community that they would all have to repatriate.

One fact on which the UNHCR has failed to comment, but is commonly noted among the refugees, is that over 90% of those who have so far repatriated have been Gurgura people -- Somali agro-pastoralists, not related to the Issas and the Afars, who made up perhaps 35% of the Dikhil camp population. The two other groups of rural refugees, the Issas and the Afars, will not be repatriated because they have each made deals with the government, the Issas being ethnically identical and physically related to those in power, and the Afars through the intervention of Ali Mirrah, their Sultan, who sent his son from Jeddah where he is exiled to negotiate with GoD. An alternative arrangement has apparently been made by Ali Mirrah with the Government of Somalia to shelter the Afars, should the need arise. At a rough estimate, there are not more than about 700 Gurgura people left in Dikhil camp, and it may therefore be assumed that the repatriation is almost over in terms of those who are willing to leave.

Perceptions of Political Refugees

Since it is widely recognized that GoD will not force repatriation on either Afar or Issa refugees, it is assumed that the current campaign must be aimed against political refugees. The UNHCR had done nothing to dispel this view, giving no assurance about the safety of political refugees or about continuation of their status.

Many refugees have decided in the past six months that their situation, in the absence of such assurance from the UNHCR, is too vulnerable in Djibouti and they have left the territory by more or less hazardous routes. Some went by boat to Jizan, hoping to get from there to the Sudan: it is reported that one of these was intercepted by the Ethiopian navy and has been taken to Addis, while another fifteen are in prison in Jizan. Some left for Somalia on foot, and the fate of many others is not known.

The month of December was a period of real terror in Dikhil camp: almost daily visits by the Commissaire, announcing that their presence is illegal and he can do what he likes in Dikhil, summonses to the repatriation office compounded by nightly visits by the military giving heavy-handed encouragement to the

campaign. There is no permanent protection presence in Dikhil, and the Protection Officer, when asked about the situation during his weekly or fortnightly visits, has either refused to discuss it with them or has told them that it is better for them to repatriate.

There is much anxiety about the forthcoming re-examination of refugee status: the political refugees in Djibouti know what they went through to get accepted the first time, and dread a re-enactment of it. The UNHCR's platitudes, along the lines of "if you have a genuine case you have nothing to fear" hold little comfort for those who know that the UNHCR has no control over the asylum process.

Asylum Seekers

Asylum seekers are those who have entered Djibouti with the intention of gaining recognition as refugees, but to whom recognition has not yet been accorded. They theoretically enjoy the same rights of protection as do recognized refugees during this period.

It is certainly true that a fairly constant stream of asylum seekers has been making its way into Djibouti over the past few years, and that this flow has been reduced to a trickle since the ending of registration for resettlement in February 1986. It must therefore be deduced that a strong reason for seeking asylum in Djibouti has been, in the past, the lure of resettlement. However, this being the case, it must also be deduced that those who have entered Djibouti since February 1986, and especially since July 29, 1986, must have extremely good reasons for wanting to leave Ethiopia. Yet since the GoD's circular, the decision on who is allowed to enter the territory to seek asylum has been left to the border guards, with no supervision from UNHCR. Those who manage to convince these guards that they have a case (which usually involves substantial bribes), are then taken to Dikhil where there is currently no form of registration or issue of identity documents. The asylum process has been completely halted for the past six months; no rations, tents, or materials of any kind have been issued to those arriving since July. One meal a day is provided from a canteen run by the Protestant Church, and asylum seekers have been subject to the same "encouragement" to repatriate as other refugees.

Dikhil has been designated as the place where asylum seekers must register. If they more outside of Dikhil, asylum seekers are regarded as illegal immigrants and are under threat of summary deportation. The UNHCR has stated that it can offer no protection of any kind to asylum seekers outside of Dikhil.

Several asylum seekers have repatriated: it is assumed that these were people for whom life in Ethiopia presented a rosier prospect than continuing uncertainty in Dikhil. Under extremely tough material conditions (rations for those arriving before July 1986 consist of one cup of sugar, one cup of oil and 5 kg of rice per month), many have decided to risk going to Djibouti town in search of other solutions. Others chose more radical routes: on January 8th, four asylum seekers, two new arrivals, and two who had been waiting for refugee status for more than two years, left Dikhil to try to walk to the Sudan across the Danakil desert and Eritrea. Desperate measures such as these seem to be on the increase. There is little evidence to support the High Commissioner's bland statement in his letter to the BRC of October 20th that "asylum will continue to be given to new arrivals who meet internationally accepted criteria".

The UNHCR

The staff of the UNHCR Branch Office in Djibouti seems satisfied with the progress of the repatriation so far. They admit that some of the encouragement given to refugees to register has been a little heavy-handed but see this as being an essential part of the operation. They have been pleasantly surprised by the flexible attitude demonstrated by the Ethiopian government in allowing those repatriated to move to wherever they wish.

The Representative was unconcerned by the fact that eligibility to request asylum is being decided at the border by illiterate soldiers with no knowledge of international conventions: he held the view that genuine refugees will always find ways to cross. He stressed that no protection of any kind can be offered to asylum seekers who leave Dikhil, and was dismissive of claims that rations issued to them in Dikhil were below subsistence level.

On the question of the need to extend protection to genuine political refugees, the Representative offered the view that there were very few such refugees in Djibouti, and that only the Eritreans and Tigreans had a real case. He did not consider most Amharas to be genuine cases.

The attitude of the Branch Office staff to requests by refugees for clarification of their status can only be described as casual. They see no reason to give the refugees any such clarification at this stage. Nor do they see the need to point out that, despite what the GoD's circular states, refugees have not become illegal as of December 31st. They are still hopeful that a re-examination of individual refugee status will take place within the next few