

16 February 2009

Eritrea: IDPs returned or resettled but border tensions remain

Despite the Algiers Peace Agreement and the decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission, there is a continuing impasse over the demarcation of the border between the two countries and the status of the town of Badme. This presents an ongoing serious risk of escalating tension and of renewed conflict that may have serious political and humanitarian consequences.

The peace agreement led to the return and resettlement of IDPs in home areas and resettlement villages, but given the tension, the possibility of another displacement remains. Even though the government claims that everyone displaced as a result of the border war has returned or been resettled, it is likely that some have yet to achieve durable solutions, whatever their situation. Furthermore, there is very little information on the welfare of IDPs who may still be living with host communities.

Although important assistance has been provided, the uneasy relationship between the Government of Eritrea and UN agencies and international and local NGOs has undermined efforts to respond to the needs of IDPs.

Map of Eritrea



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Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Background: border conflict with Ethiopia

Eritrea became a nation state again in 1993 following a referendum which saw its inhabitants vote overwhelmingly in favour of independence from Ethiopia. Eritrea had been formally annexed by its neighbour to the south in 1962. From 1998 to 2000, the two states were involved in a border conflict which remains unresolved.

Massive displacement was witnessed in May 1998 when fighting broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the border town of Badme in Gash Barka region. Out of a population of 3.8 million, some 19,000 fighters and many civilians were killed and over a million people were uprooted from their homes.

Following a ceasefire in June 2000 and the Algiers Peace Agreement in December of the same year, many of the people displaced returned to their home areas. In March 2001, the demilitarised Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) was established along the 1,000-kilometre Eritrea-Ethiopia border, and 4,200 UN peacekeeping troops were deployed under the auspices of the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) to monitor the ceasefire. An independent Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC) was mandated to delineate and demarcate the border, and released a legally-binding decision in April 2002 in favour of Eritrea's territorial claims. In particular, the commission placed Badme, the border town over which the war had broken out, in Eritrea. This decision was contested by the Ethiopian government, and the physical demarcation that was to start in May 2003 has been repeatedly been postponed

and no tangible progress has been made towards the implementation of the EEBC delimitation decision.

Deteriorating relations between Eritrea and UNMEE forced an end to peacekeeping operations in 2008, following the Ethiopian government's refusal to comply with the border ruling. The government began to question the benefit of the force in light of the lack of international pressure on Ethiopia to relinquish Badme, and in January 2008, it began deploying the army in the TSZ and forcing UNMEE off its territory. It considered the EEBC's virtual demarcation to be the end of the border dispute and argued that the continued presence of UNMEE or Ethiopian troops on its territory was tantamount to occupation. As the government stopped UNMEE helicopter flights and cut its fuel supplies, the force found itself unable to transport personnel, generate electricity or refrigerate food and medical supplies (ICG, 17 June 2008, p.ii). The UN Security Council formally terminated UNMEE on 31 July 2008 (IRIN, 1 August 2008).

Background: government policy on international support

The Eritrean government adopted in 2005 a new humanitarian policy based on greater self-reliance. This was driven by its perception that the international community and western governments had not done enough to compel Ethiopia to hand over Badme, and to underline that it could do without western aid. The move entailed a shift from free food distribution to food-for-work and cash-for-work schemes (GoE, 3 May 2006; IRIN, 23 March 2006). Free food distribution to IDPs was reduced, except to those who had been

recently displaced into camps (WFP Eritrea, July 2007). At the same time, the government stepped up the construction of general and agricultural infrastructure in order to better ensure food security.

The government also introduced regulations in 2005 that limited the activities of international NGOs, regardless of its own capacity and resource limitations. UN agencies were not allowed to channel funding through NGOs in Eritrea, and NGOs could no longer act as implementing partners for CERF-funded projects (OCHA, 12 April 2007). The number of NGOs operating in the country accordingly fell from 37 to ten between May and September 2005.

Numbers displaced and issues of return

By the end of 2000, the total number of IDPs had fallen from an estimated peak of 1.1 million at the height of the conflict to about 210,000 (USCR 2001, p.77). In recent years, the information available has been more piecemeal.

In early 2006, the government stepped up its return and resettlement efforts with the goal of returning all IDPs to their home areas or moving them to resettlement villages. In March 2006, it estimated that there were almost 8,900 displaced households in the border regions of Gash Barka and Debub (Government of Eritrea, March 2006). This would correspond roughly to 45,000 individuals. Of those, over 30,000 people had returned to their areas of origin or resettled by September 2007, including an estimated 10,000 people who had been living with host communities. Most moved to areas in the TSZ.

As of the end of May 2006, about 960 displaced households had returned to their homes in Gash Barka (UN, email correspondence, 31 May 2006). According to government sources, over 3,400 families returned home to the Gash Barka region in the first months of 2007, including 2,000 returnees from Golij, Tebeldiya, Gergef, Sabunait, Tessenei and others who were resettled in Omhajer and in Ayterf and its surroundings. Over 900 families from the makeshift Adi-Baare camp in Shambuko sub-zone returned to Binbina, Adi-Maelel and Tologumja, while almost 500 families returned to Anagulu in Barentu sub-zone. One thousand people originally from the Gerset area, had been resettled (IRIN, 23 May 2007, Reuters Foundation, 23 May 2007; Government of Eritrea, 20 May 2007).

According to UNDP in October 2007, all IDPs from Gash Barka had returned and camps had been closed, but an estimated 12,670 IDPs were still living in camps in Debub region. They were expected to return or resettle as soon as government funds became available. It was not clear if any (and how many) IDPs remained dispersed and unregistered in host communities (UN source by email, 3 October 2007).

Various UN sources have reported that by mid-2008, all IDPs in Eritrea had either returned or been resettled. For example, OCHA reported that there were no remaining IDPs and the government had resettled the 11,000 IDPs in Debub camps (OCHA ROCEA, July 2008). According to a UNDP source, some IDPs were still living with hosts at the beginning of 2009 (UNDP-Eritrea, January 2009). However, it has not been possible to get information on their number or liv-

ing conditions, either from UN agencies or from international NGO sources.

Concerns have been voiced about the viability of the returns, in particular with regard to social infrastructure and services in return areas. Lack of clean water, food and sustainable livelihoods have threatened the durability of returns and may have put great strain on communities (OCHA ROCEA, 3 October 2007). In its May 2007 donor update, UNICEF called for the urgent delivery of emergency items and basic social services for some 10,000 returnees (UNICEF, 2 May 2007). ICRC has also voiced concerns over the resettlement programme, for example on the suitability of resettlement areas to support the livelihoods of those who were settled.

National and international responses to displacement

Both the government and the international community identified IDPs in Eritrea as a specific group in need of assistance. Thus IDPs and returnees were exempted from the national cash-for-work programme. Although operational challenges affected the response to internal displacement in areas of displacement and return, both national and international organisations provided assistance; ICRC provided aid to both returnees and the local population along the border (ICRC, June 2007).

Government support has included reconstruction and livelihoods assistance. In October 2006, the government reported supporting over 1,600 returnee families. The families had returned home from makeshift camps in Koitabiya, Korokon and Denbe-Doran and were given 5,000

Nakfa (\$330) each for constructing a house (Government of Eritrea, 9 October 2006). In November 2008, the coordinator of the government's IDP programme in Dehub region reported that financial support had been extended to over 1,700 families in Ambesete-Geleba, Mihrad-Chele and Endabaestifanos to build homes and purchase seeds and livestock. In addition, over 400 families from Mai-Wurai had reportedly been rehabilitated in Gash Barka region and two hectares of land had been distributed to each. To this end, the regional administration had disbursed over three million Nakfa (approximately \$200,000) (Reliefweb, 29 November 2008).

The completion of demining programmes has been essential for sustainable returns. The government has collaborated with the UN to clear fertile areas that were previously planted with land mines, such as Shilalo and Shambuko in Gash Barka region, to pave the way for returns. ACT International was working on resettling four communities in the sub-zones of Areza and Mai Mine in Dehub region; as those zones were heavily affected by the war, de-mining of the resettlement sites preceded the people's return (ACT International, 24 July 2007, p.3).

A UN representative reported in 2007 that the lack of engagement between aid agencies and the government represented an enormous challenge to successful aid delivery and long-term food security (IRIN, 27 April 2007). Nonetheless, a 2007 CERF grant for which Eritrea qualified as an under-funded emergency covered the sectors of health and nutrition, mine action, assistance to refugees, water and sanitation and emergency education. UNICEF and WHO were to provide ac-

cess to a water supply for 9,000 people from IDP settlements and surrounding areas in Gash Barka and Debub by installing hand pumps in 20 rehabilitated wells and eight newly-drilled boreholes. In addition, 600 household latrines would be constructed. UNICEF would respond to the emergency education needs of an estimated 3,000 children who had recently returned to their villages of origin from the IDP camps or who were then still in the camps in Gash Barka and Debub (OCHA, 12 April 2007).

On the political front, the continuing impasse over the demarcation of the border and the status of the town of Badme presents an ongoing serious risk of renewed

conflict and a major source of instability in the Horn of Africa. Following the Ethiopian government's refusal to accept the virtual demarcation of the border by the EEBC, the unilateral Eritrean implementation and expulsion of UNMEE peacekeepers significantly increased the risk of new conflict. The Eritrean insistence on recovering territory awarded by the Commission, and Badme in particular, could lead to unilateral military action by either side (ICG, 17 June 2008).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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