

ERITREA: WAR AND DROUGHT AFFECTED POPULATION

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The Disaster

The conflict situation •

The escalation of the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea during May 2000 provoked a massive displacement of people, especially in the zobas (provinces) of Debub, Gash-Barka and Anseba. A total of 1.1 million people (official figures) are estimated to have been displaced. Approximately 100,000 fled to Sudan and 1 million were internally displaced. Since most of this displacement has occurred very suddenly, within a period of less than two weeks, most people were unable to carry with them any possessions, in many cases not even the most essential household items.

Since the ceasefire agreement, signed by Ethiopia and Eritrea on 18 June, significant numbers have returned and more are expected to return soon to their home communities. In most cases, people are returning too late for this year's planting season (June-July and early August), and often they find their homes looted or destroyed. According to the latest estimates (28 July), more than 500,000 people were still living in camps, villages or settlements as internally displaced. This figure is, however, changing on daily basis.

Some of the areas in the Southern Debub province are still occupied by Ethiopian forces, awaiting the arrival of the UN Peacekeeping force.

Repatriation of Eritrean refugees from Sudan is carried out by the UNHCR and the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC). As of August 10, some 21,000 refugees have been repatriated.

The drought situation •

Insufficient rains in Eritrea in June - September 1999 (northern highlands) and December 99 - February 2000 (Northern and Southern Red Sea Coastal Areas) have left vast areas with little or no harvest during the 1999/2000 harvesting season. The provinces of Anseba, Northern Red Sea and Southern Red Sea have been particularly badly affected. According to official figures (ERREC, May 2000) a total of 335,000 drought affected people are in urgent need of food aid.

Due to the war, people affected by drought in Eritrea have been receiving far less attention in recent months than before. Food supplies have been irregular and insufficient, yet dependency on food distributions is increasing.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Red Cross Society of Eritrea (RCSE) has been very active throughout the escalation of the conflict. Volunteers were deployed to assist IDPs fleeing the conflict zones from the west towards safer areas in zoba Anseba, and from the south into zoba Dehub. Around 1,000 volunteers, have supported IDPs with water at water points along the road. In two of the IDP camps, they have supported them initially with water, biscuits and bread. Local financial support for this first phase was obtained from the Swiss Disaster Relief and the Danish Embassy. Those fallen sick, have been supported by the RCSE First Aiders in clinics and hospitals.

In a joint relief operation, ICRC/RCSE have been involved in distribution of non-food items to IDPs (tents, tarpaulins, blankets, jerry cans), in providing safe passage to Ethiopian returnees leaving Eritrea, reception of Eritrean returnees from Ethiopia, tracing, dissemination, water trucking to IDP camps and continued assistance at health clinics and hospitals.

Water/sanitation and first aid/health projects being implemented under the Federation Appeal 2000 programme for Eritrea as well as bilateral projects have shifted their focus and activities towards the drought and war affected areas.

Following the visit to Eritrea of an ICRC nutritionist in mid-July, the ICRC has made a decision to support an RCSE operation for drought victims in zoba Anseba by food distributions, initially for 3 months. In line with the Seville Agreement, the ICRC will request assistance from donors and support the operation logistically. The RCSE will be responsible for monitoring, food distribution, reporting and branch involvement. The Federation will support the RCSE in monitoring, reporting and branch development during the operation.

Recognition •

On 29 July 2000, the Minister of Foreign Affairs signed Geneva Conventions on behalf of the Government of Eritrea. According to the information from the ICRC legal department, the Conventions will enter into force immediately.

Following the pledge of the Government of Eritrea during the 1999 International Conference in Geneva, the draft Statutes of the RCSE are presently under review and negotiations with the government authorities concerning recognition of the national society are being reinforced.

Needs

Considerable needs remain to be covered in Eritrea for both the displaced and drought affected population. With large agricultural areas in Eritrea directly affected by the recent fighting, food shortages are expected to remain a major problem in the next 16 to 18 months.

When internally displaced people and returnees from Sudan return to their villages, they often find their homes demolished or looted and local infrastructure destroyed. Rehabilitation will continue to be a priority in the coming period.

In the present unsettled security situation, ICRC remains the lead agency within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as regards coordination of the international emergency relief assistance for Eritrea. The Red Cross Society of Eritrea supported by the Federation and the ICRC will continue to have an active role in the ongoing relief and rehabilitation activities.

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