



Ethiopia Briefing: Implementation of the Out of Camp Scheme for Eritrean Refugees:

Mission: September 24- October 3, 2010

BACKGROUND:

In May 1998, Eritrean forces attacked part of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border region, seizing some Ethiopian-controlled territory. The strike spurred a two-year war between the neighboring states that cost over 70,000 lives.¹

Since the beginning of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, over 60,000 Eritreans fleeing from the fighting and forced conscription have sought protection in Ethiopia². The overwhelming majority of these refugees are hosted by the Ethiopian government in five rural camps in the Tigray region. Despite the fact that a large number of the refugees originate from urban environments in Eritrea, a mere 2,301 are hosted in cities and towns such as Addis Ababa and Axum. As a result, many Eritreans struggle to adapt to life in remote camps. An estimated 75 percent are young adults hoping to work or gain an education. Many are separated from their relatives who live elsewhere in Ethiopia.



ACHIEVEMENTS:

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) commends the Ethiopian government for its generous Out of Camp Scheme, which grants Eritrean refugees freedom of movement and access to education in Ethiopia while maintaining their right to resettlement. Ethiopia's decision to publicize the Out of Camp Scheme and encourage Eritreans to participate prompted USCRI to seek more information about its initial implementation. In September 2010, Danielle Bolks, USCRI Special Projects Manager, and Ken Leung, actor and USCRI Delegate advocating for refugee rights, visited UNHCR-sponsored refugee camps in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The USCRI representatives report

¹ Background Note: Ethiopia, Bureau of African Affairs: Department of State, [Online] Accessed 11/8/2010.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2859.htm>

² UNHCR Briefing Notes. "UNHCR welcomes Ethiopian decision to relax encampment of Eritrean refugees Ethiopia," *UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic*. August 10th 2010

that refugees expressed gratitude to the Ethiopian government for the opportunity to move freely out of the camps and access education in Ethiopia.

Of the 500 or more refugees who have left the camps since implementation of the Out of Camp Scheme, over 200 were given the opportunity to pursue education at Addis Ababa, Mekelle, and Axum Universities. USCRI understands that Eritrean refugees receive free education and equal treatment as Ethiopian students. The Ethiopian government refugee agency, Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), provides support for initial one-time tuition, accommodations, textbooks, and small living expenses to each student. Eritrean refugees in the camp voiced excitement and appreciation to the Ethiopian government for this opportunity and told USCRI they are especially encouraged to see equal educational opportunities for refugee women.

“I feel honored and privileged to have been able to meet and talk with some of the Eritrean refugees living in Shimelba and Mai Aini refugee camps. Their stories of flight, encampment, and their prayers for peace in Eritrea were very moving. I was happy to learn some of them left the camps to attend university with the support of the Ethiopian government and that others continue to have options of living outside the camp,” said Ken Leung, former cast member of the television series *Lost*.



CHALLENGES:

USCRI witnessed a positive reaction to the Out of Camp Scheme by Eritrean refugees. However, this is combined with a continued hesitancy about accessing the scheme, which accounts for the low number of participants as of the end of September 2010. Despite retaining resettlement eligibility while living outside the camp, many Eritreans from the Tigrinya ethnic group in Shimelba Refugee Camp stated that they prefer to remain in the camp until their resettlement process is complete.

- Living outside the camp and accessing resettlement can be difficult since refugees must pay their own transportation back to the camp for interviews, documentation, processing, etc. Often, the notification for an interview may not give the refugee enough time to return to the camp from towns like Addis Ababa, which require more than one day of travel by bus. Rather than risk being a “no show” for a resettlement interview, most refugees choose to remain in the camp.
- Additionally, since the Out of Camp Scheme does not grant refugees the right to work, many fear becoming a burden to their family or friends who sponsor them. USCRI understands that if a refugee leaves the camp to join a relative who later is not able to support him or her, the refugee has the option to return to the camp. Faced with financial hardship, many refugees may have no other choice but to work without documentation. Compared to other Eritrean refugees, those from the Tigrinya ethnic group have a strong advantage for employment opportunities due to a shared language and culture within northern Ethiopia.

- Moreover, refugees from minority ethnic groups, like the Saho and Kunama, voiced concerns about their limited ability to access the scheme due to linguistic barriers and lack of a relative or friend to support them in Ethiopia.
- Additionally, representatives of the refugee elders, disabled refugees, and HIV-positive refugee communities expressed similar concerns. Due to the challenges posed by their specific conditions, many felt more comfortable to stay in the camps and depend on UNHCR and ARRA for support, rather than be a burden to their relatives outside of camps.
- This same sentiment was voiced by refugees with large families in the camp. These refugees felt that if their families were given a one-time cash grant, their relatives would be more willing to accept responsibility for supporting their large families.

GROUPS of CONCERN:

Unaccompanied Children:

In Mai Aini Refugee Camp, USCRI meet with representatives of the Unaccompanied Children's



(UAC) group. Of the approximately 1,000 children currently living without parents at Mai Aini, 100 are under 12 years old, and 200 are girls. Many of the youngest children fled Eritrea in search of missing family members, often without their parents' knowledge. Others, primarily boys, crossed the border accidentally while herding their family's cattle.

Until 2009, ARRA, UNHCR, and the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC) worked together to reunite refugees

under 10 years of age with their family members in Eritrea. Unfortunately, when the Eritrean government expelled ICRC from the country in 2009, monitoring the safety and security of the minors and their families could no longer take place. As a result, UNHCR discontinued repatriating children.

The number of children is exceeding the camp's capacity and jeopardizing its infrastructure. This is particularly evident in the overcrowded school. Additionally, the children complained about lack of space in their homes. Upon touring the living quarters, USCRI encountered 13-14 minors residing in a two-room mud house, where the oldest refugee is in charge of the home. An adult refugee acts as "foster parent" responsible for up to 60 minors. When asked how these adult refugees were chosen, ARRA social workers explained that most are former teachers who receive additional rations as an incentive for taking on this responsibility. In the camp UACs lack basic necessities, such as shoes, clothes, adequate shelter, and proper nutrients.

Many of the children desperately miss their families and depression is a serious concern for the social workers. The children know that if they go back to Eritrea, they risk being detained until old enough for military training. They also worry about the fate and safety of their families. Family

members back in Eritrea are often detained because their child fled the country. Another common practice is to force one member of the family to serve in the military in place of another relative. For these reasons the children are unlikely to return home. It is essential to seek alternative long-term solutions, such as encouraging Ethiopian foster families to host the youngest refugee children. However, this is a difficult solution to implement in a country with a limited foster care system, which currently functions only in Addis Ababa.

Nomadic Afar Eritreans:

Unable to visit the Afar Region of Ethiopia due to security concerns, USCRI representatives, in conversation with UNHCR Ethiopia, learned that over 11,000 Eritrean Afar refugees live outside of camps and maintain their nomadic, cattle-herding lifestyles. This year, however, the government of Ethiopia has been strongly encouraging UNHCR to build a camp for these refugees. UNHCR, on the other hand, in an effort to shift limited resources to needs in the Tigray region, prefers to monitor protection of the Eritrean Afar refugees while allowing them to remain in the community. ARRA, for its part, has even chosen a location for their shared ARRA/UNHCR office.

USCRI acknowledges that the tracking of refugee families and monitoring of protection is made more difficult by the region's often extreme heat, difficult terrain, and flash flooding. However, allowing these factors to lead to an effective reversal of the Out of Camp Scheme for this group of Eritrean refugees would be counterproductive. USCRI believes services of additional food, water, and education could be implemented in a manner which does not force a nomadic people to live in camps.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS:

Among the 140, 000 refugees currently living in Ethiopia are 60,000 Eritreans, many of whom have been encamped in the Tigray region for more than 5 years. That said, the Ethiopian government's decision to allow Eritrean refugees freedom of movement and open educational access after only six months of residing in a camp is a significant step toward ending the warehousing of refugees.

USCRI Recommendations:

- 1) Continue monitoring implementation of Out of Camp Scheme.
 - a. In an effort to provide equitable access for all refugees, consider offering one-time cash incentives to relatives or friends who sponsor especially vulnerable Eritrean refugees, including the disabled, elders, large families, single mothers, etc.
- 2) Encourage an increasing number of refugees to participate in the Out of Camp Scheme by offering additional scholarships to Ethiopian universities.
- 3) Consider strategic use of resettlement for the Eritrean Saho ethnic group. The group is small (1,116 individuals as of Aug. 31, 2010) and due to linguistic barriers is unlikely to access the Out of Camp Scheme
- 4) Fund livelihood initiatives through UNHCR for over 11,000 Eritrean Afar refugees to encourage their continued freedom of movement. Rather than building a camp structure, urge the Ethiopian government to develop the local Ethiopian Afar communities and allow the Eritrean Afar refugees access to Ethiopian schools and resources.

Potential Protracted Refugee Situations:

- 1) Increase protection and access to durable solutions for the 1000 unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) in Mai-Aini camp:
 - a. Pressure Eritrean government to allow safe and appropriate repatriation of youngest URM to family members.
 - b. Request that repatriation monitoring by the International Committee of the Red Cross be reinstated.
 - c. Pressure ARRA to increase the number of shelters for URM in the camp.
 - d. Pressure ARRA to increase the number of adult caregivers in the camp to a ratio of 1 adult per 20 children under the age of 12.
- 2) Increase access to durable solutions for Kunama refugees who choose not to resettle and expect to remain in Shimelba Camp indefinitely.