

**GETTING HOME
IS ONLY HALF THE CHALLENGE:**
Refugee Reintegration in War-Ravaged Eritrea



ERITREA

August 2001



GETTING HOME IS ONLY HALF THE CHALLENGE: Refugee Reintegration in War-Ravaged Eritrea



I. INTRODUCTION

The oldest large-scale refugee situation monitored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) might soon come to an end. But numerous challenges remain. Getting refugees back home to Eritrea is only the beginning.

As many as 160,000 Eritrean refugees who fled to Sudan during Eritrea's 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia—a war that ended a full decade ago—expect to repatriate as soon as possible with the assistance of UNHCR. These long-term refugees are the loose ends that never got tied up in the aftermath of that long-ago war.

Events since Eritrea's war for independence, including another devastating war with Ethiopia during 1998-2000, have complicated efforts to repatriate the refugee population. Yet the post conflict situation in Eritrea today presents new opportunities to resolve the prolonged refugee problem once and for all.

Long-term refugees who return home to Eritrea—some of whom have been in Sudan for decades—will have a chance to participate in Eritrea's current post-war reconstruction alongside their compatriots, thereby easing the returnees' social reintegration.

Returning refugees will settle into host communities where current residents were previously refugees or internally displaced persons themselves, and therefore residents will know what the new returnees are experiencing and what they need. This will likely aid the reintegration process.

Meanwhile, the recently concluded Eritrea-Ethiopia war has attracted a large number of international aid agencies to engage in community-based relief and rehabilitation projects that will directly or indirectly benefit former refugees.

In Sudan, where Eritrean refugees currently reside, living conditions and political instability are pressuring many refugees to consider returning to Eritrea immediately. At least 200,000 refugees have repatriated spontaneously from Sudan to Eritrea since the late 1980s.



Eritrea's Provinces



As a decades-old civil war in Sudan has spread to the north, returning Eritrean refugees charge that the government there has begun to conscript young Eritrean men to fight Sudanese rebels. The widespread assumption that UNHCR may soon wind down its refugee assistance program for Eritreans in Sudan—similar to its phase-out of aid for Ethiopian refugees there—has convinced many Eritreans that now is the moment for large-scale repatriation, after so many years of waiting.

Several factors have long delayed a large-scale, formal repatriation program until now. Friction between the government of Eritrea and the international community undermined efforts to bring the refugees home voluntarily in the early 1990s. Chronic funding shortfalls for repatriation and reintegration projects compounded the delay.

A rupture in relations between Eritrea and Sudan, followed by renewed fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia, held up repatriation during the last half of the 1990s. During the most recent round of war in May-June 2000, tens of thousands of Eritreans—many of them former refugees—fled back into Sudan just as UNHCR trucks were preparing to bring home long-term refugees from the independence war.

A series of three agreements among UNHCR and the governments of Eritrea and Sudan since March 2000 has set the stage for the resumption of an organized repatriation program.

The three parties agreed in March 2001 that they would first provide repatriation assistance to short-term Eritrean refugees who fled to Sudan last year. Authorities agreed that they would then help repatri-



ate long-term refugees from the independence war. The repatriation program got underway in May 2001 and continued until early July when the annual summer rains forced its temporary curtailment. More than 20,000 refugees participated in this first round. The program is expected to resume in September 2001 and continue through the end of 2002.

The steps taken now to make repatriation a success could help determine the prospects for stability and peace in the region for years to come.

The challenge is daunting. The returning refugee population will go home to a country ravaged by some of the heaviest warfare in modern African history—a rare instance of African states battling each other with well-equipped, highly-disciplined modern armies on defined battlefronts stretching more than 600 miles (1,000 km) long. Civilian casualties were relatively light—though as many as 100,000 combatants may have perished—but massive civilian displacement and widespread destruction of property occurred in western Eritrea's Gash-Barka Zone, to which most refugees will return.

The scale of the current emergency is staggering. A joint assessment of humanitarian needs by the United Nations and the Eritrean government estimates that 960,000 of Eritrea's 3.5 million people were internally displaced or directly affected by the recent war with Ethiopia.

More than 200,000 Eritreans, most from villages and towns along the Ethiopian border, were still living in makeshift camps behind the frontlines when the refugee repatriation program began in May 2001. Some 50,000 Eritreans remained in camps at the onset of the summer 2001 rainy season.

As many as 600,000 internally displaced Eritreans from communities farther from the border had gone back to their homes by January 2001. Many returnees found their homes badly damaged, and they had missed last year's crop cycle. According to official estimates, another 730,000 drought-affected persons need food assistance in 2001, bringing the total number of Eritreans receiving some form of relief to almost 60 percent of the population.

Tens of thousands of Eritreans expelled from Ethiopia during the recent fighting are also in need, and some 200,000 soldiers are scheduled for demobilization. The 160,000 long-term refugees returning home from Sudan will be added to this social mix.

The very complexity of these overlapping social and economic crises offers a rare chance to stabilize Eritrean society and point it in a new direction, while integrating these disparate populations in the process.

A significant number of Eritrean civilians living in returnee areas of western Eritrea are experienced in repatriation-related activities and stand ready to assist with reconstruction and resettlement programs. Among the expellees from Ethiopia are many Eritreans with management and administrative skills who could, with minimal short-term training, prove useful. Demobilized former combatants can also provide human resources for repatriation, reintegration, and development projects.

A postwar stabilization program that is large-scale and community-based could help integrate returning refugees, recently displaced persons, expellees from Ethiopia, and former combatants with one another. A proper assistance program could also position the country to concentrate its resources on development rather than military defense for years to come.

But international assistance strategies that address Eritrea's social challenges, economic problems, political concerns, and population groups in a piecemeal fashion or as competing priorities could keep the country off-balance indefinitely.

As the Eritrean government and UNHCR work with the Sudanese government to re-start the process of repatriating 160,000 Eritrean refugees, it is imperative that the international community give proper support to reintegration and development efforts. It is unlikely that organized repatriation can be revived if it falters yet again.

A badly run repatriation program could leave thousands of Eritrean refugees stranded in Sudan without hope, providing fodder for further political instability as Islamic extremist groups opposed to the secular Eritrean government seek to recruit followers among the refugee population.

The world chose to ignore Eritrean refugees or tried to assist them on the cheap throughout Eritrea's 30-year independence war and during the 1990s. Eritrea's renewed war with Ethiopia during 1998-2000 thrust Eritrea back into the international spotlight. Many Eritreans ask today: Once peace is secure, will Eritrea be forgotten again?

The road to repatriation for Eritrea's long-term refugees has been long and arduous, marked by false starts and setbacks. The voluntary return home of 160,000 Eritreans during 2001-02 would go a long way toward bringing a durable solution to one of the world's most enduring refugee populations.

But getting Eritrean refugees home is only half the challenge. Sustaining them through full reintegration and recovery will be the hardest part.



II. FINDINGS BY USCR

Most long-term Eritrean refugees want to go home now.

An estimated quarter-million Eritreans who fled war and famine in the 1970s and 1980s remain in Sudan today. A 1998 survey indicated that nearly 160,000 of them want to return home if properly supported. An April 2001 survey confirmed these approximate numbers.

Political problems between Eritrea and Sudan, and the renewed war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, have delayed the refugees' repatriation over the years. But the resumption of diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Sudan and an apparently stable truce between Eritrea and Ethiopia have removed these obstacles to the refugees' return.

UNHCR and the governments of Eritrea and Sudan signed an agreement in March 2001 to begin a new organized repatriation program, with a goal of 62,000 voluntary returns during 2001 and up to 90,000 to 100,000 more returns during 2002.

Despite funding shortages, the repatriation program began in mid- 2001 and will continue until all those who wish to return to Eritrea have received help to do so. After organized repatriation ends, UNHCR plans to end its humanitarian assistance to those who choose to stay in Sudan.

The number of Eritrean refugees in Sudan has long been disputed.

In 1994, the Sudanese government's Commission for Refugees estimated that nearly 600,000 Eritrean refugees lived in Sudan. Eritrean government officials said that 430,000 Eritrean refugees resided in Sudan. The U.S. Committee for Refugees estimated in the mid-1990s that 380,000 Eritrean refugees remained in Sudan. By 1997, UNHCR reported that the refugee population numbered 328,000. By early 2000, UNHCR stated that approximately 250,000 Eritrean refugees were in Sudan.

The discrepancies among the population estimates are, in part, a product of differing statistical approaches. The differences are also partly due to contrasting economic interests, because refugee totals help determine international aid allocations. The gradual but steady decline in the estimates of Eritrean refugee numbers reflects a continuing flow of spontaneous returnees to Eritrea.

A successful repatriation project collapsed in the mid-1990s for political and financial reasons.

A pilot repatriation project designed and managed by Eritrean authorities helped bring home 25,000 long-term Eritrean refugees from Sudan in the mid-1990s. All agencies involved in the pilot program deemed it highly effective.

But the pilot project failed to produce a larger, more prolonged repatriation program because of deteriorating relations between Eritrea and Sudan, and the international community's failure to provide adequate funds. Eritrean refugees have awaited an organized repatriation program ever since.

War blocked a new repatriation program in 2000.

A tripartite agreement among Sudan, Eritrea, and UNHCR in March 2000 included plans to facilitate the voluntary return of 160,000 Eritrean refugees beginning in May 2000. The plan was aborted when renewed war erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

All funds earmarked for the return and reintegration of Eritrean refugees were transferred to Eritrea's new humanitarian emergency. When the war ended, UNHCR issued a new appeal in December 2000 to international donors for \$24 million to fund Eritrean repatriation.

Lack of funds could force sharp cuts in the new repatriation program.

Through March 2001, donor governments largely ignored UNHCR's \$24 million funding appeal of three months earlier. UNHCR decided to proceed with its organized repatriation program using \$6.2 million from its limited reserves and \$2 million more pledged in April, in hopes that donor nations will provide additional contributions after the repatriation program begins to succeed. By July 2001, pledges reached \$11.6 million, including \$4.5 million from the United States.

However, if significant new funding fails to materialize, aid workers could be forced to scale back the repatriation program, and prospective returnees could remain stranded in Sudan.

Refugees come home to a devastated country.

Refugees who return to Eritrea will arrive in a country devastated by one of the most destructive wars in modern African history.



Nearly one-third of Eritrea's 3.5 million people were displaced from their homes for different periods of time during the two years of warfare. Much of the infrastructure in western Eritrea's main resettlement areas was damaged or destroyed.

However, these grim conditions are no worse—and are far better in some respects—than the conditions encountered by Eritreans who repatriated spontaneously in the early 1990s after the independence war and found no services or infrastructure. The experience and resourcefulness of those early returnees will be an asset in the new round of formal repatriation and reintegration set to begin.

Most refugees have selected returnee sites in the worst-affected areas of Eritrea.

Of the 160,000 Eritrean refugees who have registered to repatriate from Sudan, some 104,000 of them—nearly two-thirds of the total signed up for the repatriation program—have indicated that they will return to sites in Eritrea's Gash-Barka Zone, the area worst affected by the recent round of warfare between Eritrea

and Ethiopia in May-June 2000.

Dozens of international humanitarian agencies are engaged in community-based relief and rehabilitation efforts in Gash-Barka Zone. Assistance programs already underway will complement projects that target returning refugees.

Internally displaced Eritreans might compete with returnees for limited resources.

More than 200,000 war-displaced civilians, a fifth of the total driven from their homes in May-June 2000, were still in makeshift desert camps as of May 2001. As late as July 2001, at least 50,000 remained there. Once the border areas are secure, they are slated to return to their homes. Many internally displaced families are returning to the same areas to which returning refugees plan to repatriate.

The initial needs of internally displaced Eritreans uprooted for the past year are different from the needs of returning refugees who must start from scratch after decades of exile. Once the two populations are resettled into their homes, however, their long-term rehabilita-



A war-displaced Eritrean family returns home to Gash-Barka from a refugee camp in Sudan with everything they own perched atop a rented cart. Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell



tion requirements for health care, education, water, and agricultural extension assistance will converge.

Humanitarian agencies and donors should therefore focus their programs on entire communities rather than on special, distinct target populations within each community. Aid projects that benefit entire communities will make the social and economic reintegration of returning refugees less difficult. Providing preferential assistance to returning refugees, even if well-intentioned, could trigger competition for resources with other residents that could become a source of social and political instability.

Eritreans expelled from Ethiopia might compete with returnees for aid.

More than 70,000 ethnic Eritreans were expelled from Ethiopia during the war of 1998-2000. Many languish in temporary camps in western Eritrea in mid-2001.

Authorities and aid workers plan to help integrate the expellees into existing communities once resources are available. To avoid putting expellees in competition with returned refugees and displaced persons, expellees must be incorporated into the planning and implementation of community-based rehabilitation programs.

Demobilized former soldiers might compete with returnees for assistance.

Nearly a quarter-million young Eritrean women and men under arms since 1998 will begin the process of demobilization to civilian life once the border dispute is settled by an international commission established under the December 2000 peace accord. Many demobilized soldiers will resettle in the same areas as returnees, previously displaced persons, and expellees.

The Eritrean government, the UN Development Program (UNDP), and the World Bank have designed a large-scale demobilization program, largely funded by the World Bank. The demobilization program seeks to pursue a community-based strategy for resolving the economic and social needs of former soldiers. Authorities plan to avoid offering the cash allowances that individual former combatants received ten years ago after Eritrea's independence war.

A demobilization program properly oriented toward helping entire communities could benefit a broad cross-section of war-affected Eritreans, including returning refugees. Such a program might also promote solidarity among various population groups as they are called upon to join together in reconstruction efforts.

Landmines are a major problem in returnee areas. De-mining efforts fall short.

Thousands of anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines remain in the border areas where returning refugees and displaced civilians are headed home.

Although Eritrean officials have supplied detailed charts showing where the Eritrean military placed landmines during the conflict, Ethiopian authorities claim they have no maps to indicate where their forces placed mines. This leaves thousands of landmines unidentified in areas where returning refugees and others will settle.

De-mining experts have surveyed the problem, and training programs are underway to expand the number of mine-clearers. Funds for the de-mining program are woefully short, however. Landmines will remain a hazard for years unless the de-mining program expands substantially.

Sudan has frequently blocked or delayed the repatriation of Eritrean refugees during the past ten years.

Plans to return long-term Eritrean refugees have faltered repeatedly because the government of Sudan postponed implementation or found reasons to avoid fulfilling its obligations. Meetings among officials of the Sudanese and Eritrean governments and UNHCR were twice postponed in early 2001, rendering repatriation prior to the onset of the summer rainy season difficult.

The pattern of delay by Sudanese officials is a familiar one. The motive for this foot-dragging appears to be economic—an effort to reap the benefits of continuing international aid programs for the refugee population in Sudan.

Up to half of the Eritrean refugees who originally fled to Sudan during Eritrea's independence war have already repatriated, primarily on their own.

An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 long-term Eritrean refugees repatriated on their own during the 1990s with little or no international assistance. Officially organized repatriation programs, through May 2001, had facilitated the return of only 25,000 long-term refugees who fled during the war for independence, and 25,000 short-term refugees who fled during the May-June 2000 conflict with Ethiopia.

About one-third of the 250,000 Eritrean refugees believed to be in Sudan in early 2001 may choose to stay there permanently.



Most of the refugees who returned home on their own during the 1990s have rapidly integrated into the Eritrean government's community development programs. Flexible assistance from UN agencies and other humanitarian organizations over the years has helped meet returnees' transitional needs, despite funding shortfalls.

A strategy of flexible response by the Eritrean government and by international agencies is likely to characterize the forthcoming repatriation effort, and is necessary to compensate for UNHCR's severe funding problems.

More international aid agencies are poised to work with vulnerable populations in Eritrea than at any time since independence.

More international aid agencies are operating in Eritrea in 2001 than ever before. The larger international presence has occurred because of the humanitarian emergency created by the recent war with Ethiopia, and the Eritrean government's more conciliatory position toward international agencies.

After years of tensions between Eritrean authorities and international aid agencies, Eritrean officials have built improved working relations with UNDP, UNICEF, and UNHCR. The World Bank is deeply involved in a planned demobilization program. More than 30 private international humanitarian organizations are supporting projects in war-affected areas.

This on-the-ground international presence—much of it focused on community-based relief and rehabilitation—is an important resource for refugee reintegration. Even agencies that do not officially work on refugee reintegration are implementing post-war programs that will indirectly assist returnees.

Eritrean and UNHCR officials urge that rapid voluntary repatriation and reintegration should occur now.

Despite obstacles facing a repatriation program, Eritrea authorities and UNHCR insist that the moment to facilitate large-scale voluntary repatriation is now, while the opportunity exists to integrate vulnerable populations with one another and to overcome social and cultural barriers among them.

Now is the moment when the international community is focused on efforts to restore infrastructure and assist with community-based rehabilitation in resettlement areas. The Eritrean government and local humanitarian agencies are positioned to carry out a

comprehensive reintegration program, and relations between Eritrea and Sudan finally are conducive to a cooperative undertaking.

Current conditions favoring safe and dignified repatriation will likely dissipate if repatriation encounters further delays.

As the emergency in Eritrea abates, the Eritrean government will likely renew its commitment to self-reliance by phasing out relief programs and curbing the activities of international aid agencies, though not as severely as in the 1990s.

As the urgency in Eritrea diminishes, the international willingness to fund repatriation or other rehabilitation projects in Eritrea, limited as it is today, will fade further.

The potential for renewed tensions between Sudan and Eritrea remains high regarding the issue of alleged support that each provides for opposition movements against the other. There is no certainty that the current intergovernmental cooperation on repatriation can be sustained for long.

All these factors argue for a properly funded program to facilitate voluntary repatriation now, without further delays.



Many of those slated to return to Eritrea were born in Sudanese refugee camps and are seeing their homeland for the first time upon arrival in Gash-Barka. Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell



III. COLONIAL HISTORY

Ever since the United Nations placed the former Italian colony of Eritrea under Ethiopian rule in 1952, repression and war have pushed Eritrean refugees from their homeland. Colonial empires—both European and African—that were established in the region more than a century ago set the stage for the decades of conflicts that followed.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Italians established the colony of Eritrea along the southern coast of the Red Sea. They brought loosely related peoples from nine ethnic groups, half of them Orthodox Christians and half Sunni Muslims, under a single, centralized administrative authority for the first time. They also divided peoples and disrupted highly developed local social and economic systems, particularly along the new colony's western frontier with Sudan and on its southern boundary with the emergent Ethiopian empire.

The legacy of these social and economic divisions runs through the interlocking crises and conflicts that wrack the region today.

The Italians developed Eritrea as a settler colony and as a staging area for further expansion. They built extensive road, rail, and communications facilities; expanded the territory's two seaports; established more than 300 small industries and plantations; and mobilized a 65,000-man army that fought in Italy's other colonies, Libya and Somalia.

In 1935, the Italian government used Eritrea as a base to conquer Ethiopia. British-led forces defeated the Italians in Ethiopia six years later, restoring Haile Selassie to his Ethiopian throne and taking control of Eritrea for the Allied powers during World War II.

After the war, despite Eritrean protests, the UN grafted Eritrea and its strategic Red Sea access onto land-locked Ethiopia to form a federation. The pact—which gave Eritrea two official languages and its own flag, constitution, and parliament—was promoted by the United States, which gained military and communications bases in Eritrea as payback for the arrangement.

Shortly after implementation of the federation agreement in 1952, the Ethiopian emperor stripped Eritrea of its autonomy and banned public protest. When Eritreans petitioned for UN intercession to restore the original federation and autonomy agreement, they were met with silence.

Ethiopia's Emperor Selassie disbanded the Eritrean national assembly and annexed the territory during the next decade, triggering a 30-year liberation war by Eritreans.

To this day, Eritreans point to these events—and to the failure of the international community to honor its commitments—as the source of their subsequent strife and suffering.

The seeds of Eritrean distrust toward international agencies were planted during the 1950s and were nourished by the unreliable role played by outside powers during the next three decades. Eritreans were repeatedly left to their own devices to win their freedom and to care for a population ravaged by war and drought, while Ethiopia reaped billions of dollars in politically motivated military and economic aid from the world's powers.

Throughout its long war for liberation, Eritrea served as a Cold War battlefield of dizzying political turnabouts. From 1952 to 1976, more than half of all U.S. aid to Africa went to Ethiopia, including the first jet fighters on the continent. In the late 1960s, the U.S. military deployed Special Forces units to train Ethiopian soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques. Israel sent military advisers and arms, starting in the 1950s.

In 1974, a military junta, the *Derg* (which means “committee” in the Amharic language), overthrew 82-year-old Emperor Selassie and aligned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union. Moscow promptly escalated the conflict in Eritrea and Ethiopia by pumping in more than \$11 billion in new arms. Neither the U.S. government nor its NATO allies stepped in to help the Eritrean rebels, whose maverick, left-leaning politics they distrusted.

In 1978, fighting mainly with captured weapons and facing an invasion of more than 100,000 Soviet-trained Ethiopian troops, Eritrean nationalists withdrew from large areas of previously seized territory to an entrenched base in Eritrea's Sahil Mountains. Eritrean troops defended this base for the next ten years and conducted raids behind government lines.

In the midst of this repositioning, civil war broke out for the second time between rival wings of the Eritrean liberation movement—the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Much of the fighting took place in the Gash-Barka Zone of western Eritrea, causing new outflows of refugees to Sudan.

In 1981, the EPLF defeated the ELF and drove it into Sudan, where the ELF splintered into feuding factions. Several of the sub-factions sought to organize support among Eritrean refugees residing in Sudan. These lingering political divisions and some refugees' fear of EPLF reprisal made some Eritrean refugees reluctant to repatriate during the 1980s and 1990s.

A devastating famine in 1984-85 posed an even larger obstacle to refugee return. The famine drove tens



of thousands of impoverished Eritreans of all political stripes to cross the border into Sudan in search of food.

Although the flow of refugees slowed later in the decade, the war continued for 13 more years. Eritrean nationalists and allied guerrillas in Ethiopia ousted the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991.

Two years later, with approval of the new Ethiopian government and extensive UN monitoring, Eritreans conducted a referendum on the territory's political status. More than 99 percent of Eritrea's voters chose independence. The Eritrean government, based in Asmara, declared independence on May 24, 1993.

Despite Eritrea's new status as a sovereign state, decades of war and persistent drought had left the country in ruins and kept its rural population on the brink of famine. When the fighting ended, 85 percent of Eritrean residents were dependent on donated food aid. A million Eritrean refugees languished in exile abroad, more than half of them in urban slums and rural camps in neighboring Sudan.

The question at the time of independence was how—and when—to bring the refugees home.

The same basic question has persisted to this day.

IV. THE REFUGEE CRISIS: 1967-1990

The first Eritrean refugees fled to Sudan in 1967.

The first flow of refugees occurred after Ethiopian jets bombed suspected rebel positions in villages near the city of Keren, a market center that straddles the main trade route between the plateau and the lowland plains of Gash-Barka. The air raids heralded the introduction of U.S.-supplied F-86 Sabre Jets to the conflict, along with counterinsurgency tactics borrowed from the American engagement in Vietnam.

This escalation triggered a steady flow of refugees across the territory's western border, into Sudan.

The early refugees settled near the Sudanese town of Kassala. As the counterinsurgency expanded in Eritrea, and as infighting erupted within the nationalist movement, more civilians sought sanctuary in Sudan to escape an increasingly complex crossfire. By the end of the 1960s, a chain of spontaneous settlements housing Eritrean refugees in eastern Sudan stretched from Kassala to Gedaref.

In 1970, the Sudanese government, with UN assistance, began to transfer the refugees to sites near large agricultural schemes, where they were encouraged to take low-wage, seasonal work. Some went willingly; others resisted. Some refugees sought anonymity in Sudanese towns and cities.

The next wave of refugees from Eritrea to Sudan began in 1974-75, after the Derg seized power in Ethiopia. The two Eritrean rebel groups extended the war to the densely populated central highlands. By early 1975, Ethiopian forces were under siege in Eritrea's major towns. Fighting reached the heart of the Eritrean capital, Asmara.

During the next two years, Eritrean nationalists captured all but a handful of their territory's main towns. Ethiopia's military responded with heavy bombardment of the liberated areas, displacing thousands of rural families, many of whom fled to Sudan.

Ethiopia's new Soviet-equipped army turned the tables in 1978 and recaptured all but one of the rebel-held towns. When Eritrean guerrillas retreated to the mountains, tens of thousands of Eritrean urban dwellers, fearing Ethiopian reprisals, fled to Sudan. This transformed the demographics of the refugee population—until then largely rural—and swelled its ranks to nearly a quarter-million people.

Life in the camps in Sudan was as precarious as it was trying. Overcrowding and poor planning made most camps death-traps for the inhabitants. Huts made of grass and sticks were often clustered together, posing fire hazards. Shortages of latrines in many camps forced people to defecate in open fields around the settlements or, under cover of darkness, along narrow footpaths within the camps.

The unhygienic conditions produced an extremely high incidence of intestinal parasites. Disease spread

Common Acronyms

CERA	Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ERREC	Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission
PROFERI	Program for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDP	UN Development Program
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
USCR	U.S. Committee for Refugees
WFP	World Food Program



War + Hunger = Refugees

- 1890** Italians establish colony of Eritrea.
- 1936-41** Italians invade, occupy Ethiopia.
- 1941** British forces defeat Italians, give Ethiopia independence but take control of Eritrea.
- 1952** UN links Eritrea to Ethiopia under the Ethiopian crown. United States promotes the plan.
- 1953-62** United States arms Ethiopia in exchange for military bases in Eritrea. Ethiopia restricts Eritrean autonomy. Eritrean nationalists launch independence war.
- 1967** Ethiopian jets bomb Eritrean villages. Refugees flee to Sudan, establish first camps.
- 1970-72** Eritrean independence movement splits into feuding factions—Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).
- 1974** Ethiopian junta overthrows Emperor Selassie. EPLF and ELF reconcile and intensify war for independence from Ethiopia. Widening war pushes more Eritrean refugees into Sudan.
- 1977** Eritrean independence fighters capture most towns in Eritrea. New Ethiopian regime breaks with United States and aligns with Soviet Union to strengthen Ethiopian army.
- 1978-79** Ethiopia mounts massive Soviet-backed offensive. Eritrean nationalists withdraw to mountains. More civilians flee to Sudan.
- 1980** Renewed infighting splits nationalist movement. EPLF drives ELF into Sudan. ELF splinters in Sudan, and Islamist ELF factions seek support among refugees.
- 1984-85** Famine sweeps region. Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans flee to Sudan seeking relief.
- 1988** EPLF breaks stalemate, attacks Ethiopian forces. Ethiopian military bombs rebel-held areas, displacing civilians.
- 1991** EPLF defeats Ethiopian army, helps Ethiopian opposition topple regime. Peace returns. Some refugees begin spontaneous repatriation.
- 1993** Eritrea declares independence after UN-monitored referendum. More refugees spontaneously return home.
- 1994-95** Islamist guerrillas based in Sudan attack Eritrea. Eritrean government breaks relations with Sudan.
- 1994-95** Pilot project to repatriate 25,000 refugees from Sudan to Eritrea succeeds, but funding shortfalls and political tensions halt further repatriation.
- 1998** Renewed war erupts in May-June between Eritrea and Ethiopia over contested borders. Hundreds of thousands of people become internally displaced on both sides.
- 1999** Border fighting resumes in February-March, displacing thousands more.
- 2000** Ethiopia invades Eritrea in May-June and captures Gash-Barka Zone of Eritrea. Up to 1 million Eritreans flee, including tens of thousands of new refugees to Sudan.
- 2000** Cease-fire and peace accord create possibility for refugee repatriation.



rapidly through water supplies that the refugee population often shared with animals. Chronic malnutrition compounded the seriousness of minor ailments. Though outright starvation was infrequent, death from tuberculosis, malaria, and diarrhea was common.

Despite poor conditions in the camps, Eritrean refugees continued to flee to Sudan as war and chronic drought threatened their survival at home. At the start of the 1980s, an estimated 450,000 refugees lived in Sudan, primarily from Eritrea and from other war zones in Ethiopia. More than half of the refugees occupied camps. Others—mainly townspeople—lived scattered among the slums of Sudan’s major cities.

Faced with mounting social and economic problems of its own and anxious to incorporate the refugees into state-run agricultural programs, the Sudanese government periodically rounded up urban refugees and newcomers in rural border areas and trucked them to settlement sites.

The Eritrean refugee population continued to grow rapidly. In mid-1984, for example, 25,000 new refugees lived at a spontaneous settlement in Sudan known as Wad Sherife. Five months later, as famine intensified in Eritrea, the officially reported population in Wad Sherife reached 140,000. It was the second-largest concentration of Eritreans in the world, after Asmara. It was the third-largest city in Sudan.

Some two million people within Eritrea—two-thirds of the country’s population—were at risk in the mid-1980s. Half of them received relief from the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), an Eritrean humanitarian aid group operating in guerrilla-controlled areas.

Relief supplies arriving inside Eritrea were insufficient to slow the flow of refugees across the border, however. By early 1985, a half-million Eritreans refugees resided in Sudan.

The massive size of the refugee population prompted the Sudanese government to cease transferring new refugees to agricultural schemes and special resettlement sites. This policy change had significance for later repatriation efforts: Eritrean refugees who fled to Sudan prior to 1984 had some experience with efforts to achieve self-sufficiency, albeit coerced or exploitative; refugees who arrived after 1984 depended primarily on donated assistance for their survival.

This distinction proved pivotal years later in the refugees’ repatriation decisions. It determined which refugees would choose to return rapidly without assistance, and which refugee families would choose to remain in Sudan to await an organized, assisted repatriation and reintegration program that many of them await to this day.

V. WAR YEARS: TEPID INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Despite steady growth in the number of Eritrean refugees from 1967 onward, Western governments and humanitarian agencies initially refrained from active involvement in relief efforts because of Cold War considerations. The United States enjoyed an alliance with Ethiopia, while the Soviet Union enjoyed links to Somalia and Sudan.

Western governments and relief organizations finally initiated programs in Sudan for Eritrean refugees after the U.S. government and the Soviet Union switched allies in the Horn of Africa in 1977, and after large oil reserves were confirmed in southern Sudan the following year.

Even after commencing assistance programs in 1984-85 during the worst years of the Africa famine, most aid agencies and donors declined to support relief efforts in guerrilla-held areas of Eritrea despite efficient ERA humanitarian operations there. For example, ERA designed a project to stem the exodus of refugees and to promote self-organization and economic self-reliance among them.

Many relief agencies with aid programs in Ethiopia in the 1980s feared that authorities there would close agencies’ Ethiopian programs if they became involved in guerrilla-controlled zones in Eritrea. UN agencies channeled aid into conflict areas only through the Ethiopian government.

The most significant exception to this *de facto* embargo was a consortium of European church agencies coordinated by Norwegian Church Aid, and Dutch Interchurch Aid, which functioned in Sudan under the aegis of the Emergency Relief Desk. The Emergency Relief Desk funded ERA’s extensive cross-border operations, which by early 1985 serviced more than 100,000 war- and drought-displaced civilians in 30 camps inside Eritrea.

UNHCR shouldered the task of coordinating refugee assistance in Sudan. But UNHCR had only one field representative to assess refugees’ needs and evaluate aid programs outside Khartoum until 1980.

From 1985, when the regional famine peaked, through the final six years of Eritrea’s fight for independence, the war ground on relentlessly, for the most part out of the global spotlight. By the time Eritreans won their independence in 1991, nearly 50,000 fighters were dead and 10,000 were disabled. At least five times that many civilians had perished, while a third of the country’s population was homeless.



Eritrea in Focus

Eritrea in Africa



1

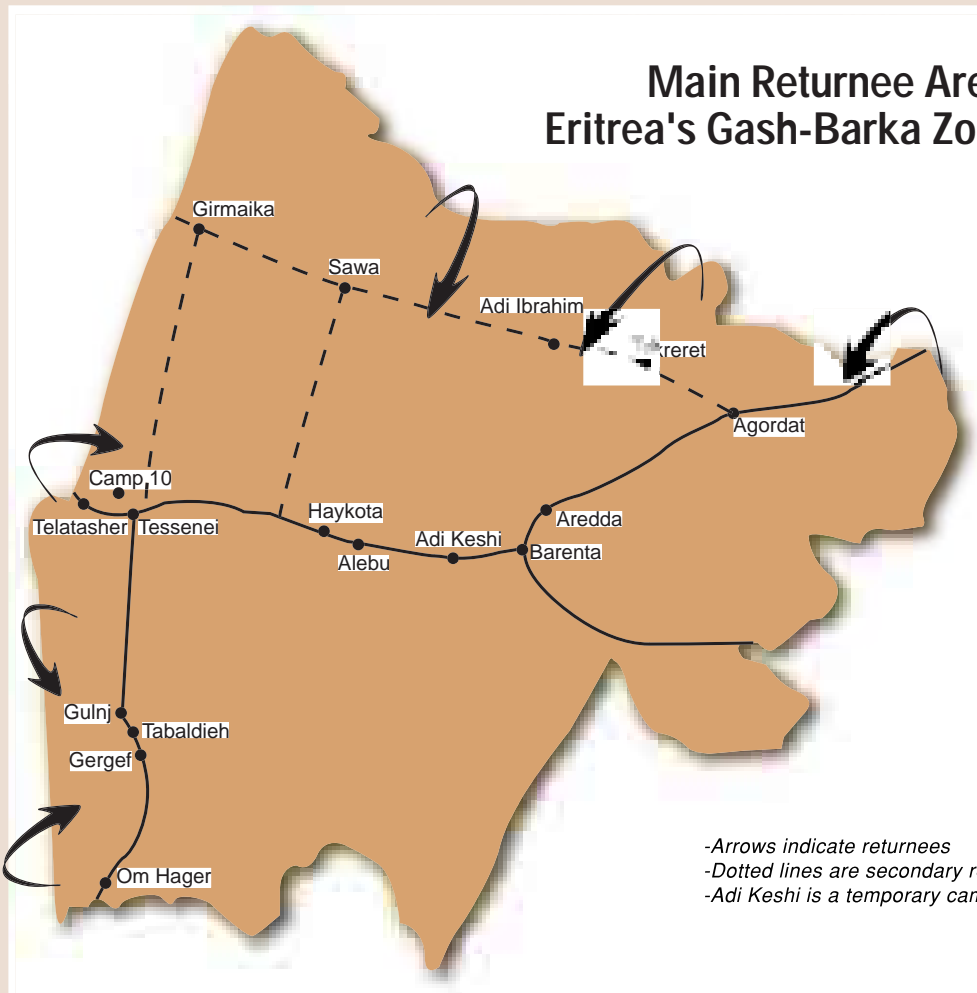
Eritrea's Governmental Zones



2

3

Main Returnee Area:
Eritrea's Gash-Barka Zone



-Arrows indicate returnees
-Dotted lines are secondary roads
-Adi Keshi is a temporary camp



Relief agencies' lack of engagement inside Eritrea during the long war promoted the flight of refugees to Sudan and fueled a deep distrust among many Eritreans toward the international community. It is a distrust that many of Eritrea's current leaders and local humanitarian relief professionals exhibit to this day.

VI. AFTER 1990: HOMEWARD BOUND WITH A ROCKY START

One of the major problems of the whole negotiation process was that the UN agencies kept changing personnel.... Each time a new person from the UN turned up, a different ideology and methodology was brought to bear. Some were deeply skeptical of the Eritreans, some obsessed with their own technocratic expertise. Few hung around long enough to see through the process.

— Beverly Jones, relief worker with Christian Aid, cited in L. A. McSpadden, *Negotiating Return* (Uppsala: Life & Peace Institute, 2001)

Some Eritrean refugees in Sudan began to make their way home in 1989, two years before the end of the liberation war, as a victory by Eritrean forces appeared imminent.

The flow of spontaneous returnees steadily increased in 1990, with fighting confined to the areas around Eritrea's ports and central cities. Returnees arrived primarily through Tessenei in the west and Karora in the north.

After the liberation war ended in May 1991, the number of returnees increased to 20-30 per day. The first years of repatriation, however, reinforced Eritrean leaders' worst impressions of the international community, and vice versa. Those tensions, combined with the distrust engendered during the war years, have helped to stall organized repatriation to this day.

The Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (CERA), established by Eritrean rebels in 1987, estimated that as many as 80,000 Eritreans returned home primarily on their own by 1992, more than 80 percent of them from Sudan. Eritrean authorities interviewed and registered the returnees before taking them to a destination of their choice.

Some returnees received land; most also received food relief and other emergency support. The relief program was spare, but effective. No UN agencies or other international organizations were involved in the return program at the time.

UNHCR established its first office in Eritrea in

November 1991, but other international bodies tended to hold the newly formed Provisional Government of Eritrea at arm's length, hampering working relations. The reason usually advanced for the international community's cool response to Eritrea's humanitarian problems was that Eritrea was not yet an officially recognized state. Many Eritreans dismissed that rationale as a poor excuse for ignoring their needs, capping a long list of such slights. Eritrean officials evinced growing impatience with the international community's delays.

The provisional government of Eritrea also clashed repeatedly with UNHCR over the scope and size of the proposed repatriation program. At the end of 1991, UNHCR issued a \$50 million appeal (only \$24 million for 1992) for the return of Eritrean refugees living in Sudan. Months later, Eritrean authorities issued a statement chastising UNHCR for "focusing exclusively on the repatriation aspect of the program while virtually neglecting the reintegration component."

UN officials also wanted to supply seed money for reintegration programs in Eritrea and then evaluate the programs before committing more funding. Eritrea's provisional government distrusted that approach for fear that donors would begin programs without finishing them. Eritrean authorities insisted that international donors should commit full funding before beginning reintegration projects.

The new government also rejected the UN strategy of operating programs of different quality and different funding levels for different regions of the country. The provisional government insisted on a national program with comparable opportunities for all participants.

Relations between the provisional government and the international community were a clash of wills and ways. Both sides had preconceptions that aggravated their relationship.

International humanitarian and development agencies had defined mandates, well-established missions, and often inflexible procedures that contradicted Eritrean leaders' insistence on operational control over all aspects of the repatriation, reintegration, and development program.

Eritrean officials, on the other hand, believed that they had established a solid track record of administration and humanitarian relief during the liberation war. They displayed little patience with delays, or with strategies that seemed to cast doubts on their own abilities. UNHCR was a creature of its donors and had only limited flexibility in addressing complaints raised by Eritrean officials.

The result was a stand-off, with rising animosities. Eritrea's provisional government was loathe to



accept what it regarded as humiliating constraints or intrusions on its sovereignty simply because such practices were common in other countries. Eritrean officials showed disdain toward international agencies' lack of previous direct experience in Eritrea.

In the opinion of many Eritreans, the needs of their people were again taking a back seat to the international community's organizational and political expediency. Most Eritreans bitterly remembered the UN's role in abandoning Eritrean autonomy after World War II. They were also acutely aware that UN agencies and other private relief agencies failed to respond to Eritrea's humanitarian needs inside the country throughout the long independence war and famine years.

For their part, many international agencies suspected that Eritrean leaders were secretly reluctant to initiate large-scale repatriation because of concerns about the political or religious allegiances of many refugees. Some international observers suspected that Eritrean officials argued about repatriation funding and strategies to hide their real concerns about the refugees themselves.

The stage was set for a bitter relationship that grew worse before it got better.

In April 1992, the Eritrean provisional government convened an interagency conference in Asmara to explore with potential donors the possibility of a \$400 million program to repatriate and resettle the 500,000 Eritrean refugees in Sudan. Donor nations and agencies offered no pledges of financial support.

In June 1992, the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs and UNHCR agreed to bring other UN agencies with broader mandates into the process, but the initiative collapsed over UN insistence on additional field assessments prior to substantive discussions. Eritreans regarded additional assessments as frivolous, expensive, and demeaning.

Other issues, fed by chronic mistrust on both sides, further poisoned the atmosphere. By August 1992, relations between the provisional Eritrean government and UNHCR broke down completely.

Efforts to revive an interagency approach resumed after Eritrean officials signed an agreement with the newly formed UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs. A new planning process commenced in Asmara in May 1993 among representatives from Eritrean ministries, UN agencies, donor states, private international relief groups, and others. UNHCR took a low profile while UNDP stepped forward to bridge the gap between agencies and institutions focused on short-term relief and those concerned with Eritrea's longer-term recovery.

Four weeks of discussions and field visits produced an outline of the basic plan that guides repatria-

tion and reintegration efforts in Eritrea to this day—the Program for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea (PROFERI).

Meanwhile, Eritrean nationals conducted a referendum in April 1993 to determine Eritrea's political status. Monitors from the UN and numerous states and organizations, including from Ethiopia, attested that the voting was free and fair.

The results of the referendum revealed near-unanimous support among Eritreans for separation from Ethiopia and independence for Eritrea. Eritrea's provisional government became a fully recognized government on the international stage.

Eritrean officials, flush with the spirit of a new beginning, set out to mobilize support for the ambitious goals for repatriation, reintegration, and national development outlined in the PROFERI plan.

VII. AMBITIOUS GOALS: PROFERI REPATRIATION PROJECT

The UNDP's approach in fulfilling its mandate in Eritrea continues to be anchored on its neutrality and impartiality as well as its respect for the national independence and sovereignty of [Eritrea]. This entails the recognition that it is the government which leads and owns its development process.

— An Assessment of the Proferi Program of Eritrea (1995-1997), UNDP

The PROFERI proposal, the basis for all subsequent repatriation efforts, laid out an ambitious strategy to bring home all Eritrean refugees—then estimated by Eritrean officials at roughly 430,000—and to resettle them over a period of three-and-a-half years at a cost of \$262 million.

According to the plan, returnee communities would benefit from 11 project categories: repatriation, food aid, water, health care, education, agriculture, environment, marine resources and fisheries, shelter, roads, and institutional capacity-building. Returning refugees would be transported to pre-selected sites, given food rations for one year, assisted to build new houses, and supplied with seeds, tools, animals, and other resources as needed.

As these were new, largely unsettled sites, the plan called for constructing schools and clinics, building rural roads, digging wells, clearing and preparing virgin land, providing vocational skills training, offer-



Building a Town from Scratch

Tabaldieh did not exist before 1,091 returning refugee families settled there in 1995 under the PROFERI repatriation project. Today, there are 1,574 families, numbering 5,574 people. Hundreds more returnees are likely to settle in Tabaldieh, during the long-delayed UNHCR repatriation program in 2001-02.

One of the original Tabaldieh settlers, Ahmed Osman, 24, recalls with mixed emotions his experience as a refugee at the Simsim agricultural scheme in Sudan.

“The life there was good when I was a child,” he said. “We started out with tents, but I grew up in a house of mud bricks and a grass roof. We had three rooms—one for my parents, one for the children, one for guests—and there was a school. My father went to fight in Eritrea, while we grew sesame and *durrah* [sorghum].”

“My biggest problem,” he added, “was wondering when I would go back to my country, when it would be free.”

Ahmed was able to repatriate when his family was selected out of thousands of applicants to participate in the PROFERI repatriation pilot program. Returnees were able to bring personal belongings with them. The Eritrean government purchased the refugees’ animals in Sudan to protect the refugees from price gouging and to enable them to buy more when they reached Eritrea.

Ahmed and other returnees received a package of supplies upon arrival but found nothing else awaiting them in Tabaldieh except a large tree for which the settlement was named.

“There was nothing, just empty land,” said Ahmed. “We were given lentils, oil, wheat, some clothes, and two hectares of land per family, just as we had had [in Sudan]. The difference was that we were working our own land because this was our country.”

ing micro-credit for new businesses, and providing follow up extension and other forms of assistance.

The aim was to ensure that the refugees—and the new communities—could sustain themselves once the program ended. The proposed starting date was July 1993.

PROFERI was expansive in its vision and scope. The process that created it broke precedents because it involved representatives of all the agencies and sectors affected. The program tied short-term objectives for affected groups to long-range, national solutions. It attempted to mobilize all the actors concerned with Eritrea’s relief and rehabilitation—whatever their preferred target populations—into a single coordinated effort to place the country on the road to economic stability.

Because PROFERI spilled over into what donors perceived as long-range reconstruction and development, the plan pushed the traditional limits of repatriation projects beyond the normal boundaries imposed by donor agencies.

The Eritrean government convened a donor conference in Geneva in July 1993 just as the program was slated to begin. President Isaias Afwerki addressed delegates from more than 120 governments and aid organizations, asking them to support Eritrea’s relief and rehabilitation efforts on its own terms—to commit

to PROFERI as a package—so that the new country could support itself without future aid.

Donor nations, however, pledged contributions of only \$32 million, most of it food aid already promised. Of the total, \$11 million was new money.

Eritreans expressed widespread disappointment with the paltry financial support offered for the return and reintegration of their citizens. Eritrean officials were aware that UNHCR had raised \$120 million during the same period to help repatriate 350,000 Cambodian refugees.

Donor nations’ unwillingness to fund PROFERI added to the conviction in Asmara that political rather than humanitarian considerations lay behind the failure to support the Eritrean government’s proposals. The funding shortfall further hardened the attitude of Eritrean authorities toward the international humanitarian aid community.

Despite the limited funds available, the Eritrean government announced a pilot program in early 1994 designed to demonstrate PROFERI’s feasibility. When the program began in November, 14 bilateral and multilateral agencies and 16 national and international private aid organizations were involved.

By April 1995, nearly 25,000 refugees (6,386 families) had returned to Eritrea. About 21,000 of



them went to ten resettlement sites in Gash-Barka Zone and Northern Red Sea Zone.

Relations between the governments of Eritrea and Sudan collapsed during the pilot repatriation program. The formal rupture came after a December 1994 raid by the Sudan-based Eritrean Islamic Jihad into Gash-Barka. The raid capped a series of ambushes and landmine explosions attributed to the Islamist guerrillas during the previous year.

Eritrea retaliated in June 1995 by hosting a conference of Sudanese opposition groups and giving them the Sudanese embassy in Asmara as their headquarters. In the months that followed, both countries militarized their borders. Talk of cooperation ceased.

Confronted with two governments refusing to communicate with each other, UNHCR demonstrated a degree of flexibility by negotiating separately with each government to complete the pilot project, rather than insisting on the usual trilateral agreement. But the arrangement was an awkward one, and made planning for Phase One of PROFERI extremely difficult. Momentum for bringing home additional refugees rapidly diminished.

VIII. GOOD RESULTS, BUT NEGLIGIBLE SUPPORT

Experts who evaluated the PROFERI pilot program in 1995 praised it. A five-person team of consultants nominated by CERA, UNHCR, UNDP, the World Food Program (WFP), and cooperating private aid agencies concluded that “the pilot phase has proved that CERA and [government] ministries can successfully implement and execute subsequent phases of the project.”

The evaluation team noted resource shortages and capacity problems to be remedied before the next large-scale phase of repatriation, but expressed confidence that these problems could be addressed easily with stronger support. Evaluators also called for minor adjustments in the program, more flexibility on the ground, more sensitivity to local factors in the design of shelter, special attention to the disproportionate number of women-headed households, and technical improvements in transportation and support services.



Returning refugee Osman Mohammed, 40, builds a new home in the resettlement camp at Teletasher, Eritrea. Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell



The evaluation team concluded that the repatriation and reintegration program should expand quickly.

To increase the program's capacity, 58 senior managers and field officers from the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC)—a product of the 1993 merger of CERA with the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Agency—participated in a training course at the University of Asmara. ERREC then set out to identify and prepare sites for the next round of returnees.

However, a donor workshop in Asmara in May 1995, convened jointly by ERREC and UNHCR, failed to generate a significant donor response. Progress stalled once again.

As a result, Phase One of PROFERI—aimed at bringing home 150,000 more refugees at a cost of \$83 million—was never fully implemented. Its primary obstacles were continuing hostility between Eritrea and Sudan, and a lack of funding.

Despite the lack of an organized repatriation program, thousands of refugees continued to repatriate on their own throughout the mid-1990s. The PROFERI strategy of full reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees continued to guide the government's work.

UNDP contributed \$9.3 million to the program from its core funds between 1995 and 1997. UNDP also managed a \$2 million trust fund for the Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) for agricultural projects for returning refugees.

A UNDP evaluation in 1997 affirmed the positive appraisal of the pilot project. Among the program's most important achievements was the creation from scratch of viable, new, multi-ethnic communities that continued to grow throughout the 1990s.

Alebu, a new community in Gash-Barka Zone that did not exist before PROFERI, was home to eight of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups. The community's members participated in multi-ethnic community associations.

Returnees in resettlement sites near the Gash River—in Gergef, Tabaldieh, and Gulu—cultivated new areas of fertile land. The sites quickly became food surplus areas that supplied highland towns and cities with grain and vegetables. Once resettled, returnees eagerly helped develop these potentially rich agricultural areas.

The UNDP evaluation urged increased support for this resettlement program and for more flexible UNDP policies and procedures to accommodate national recovery. It also recommended further investments to build local capacity and strengthen local institutions. The UNDP report noted that "Eritrean refugees continue to return from the Sudan spontaneously and in very large numbers." As many as 150,000

voluntarily repatriated between October 1995 and September 1996.

By most accounts, at least 200,000 refugees had returned—175,000 of them spontaneously—by the end of the 1990s. The Eritrean government offered all returnees food aid for a year. Some also received land, tools, seeds, and livestock. Some had help plowing their land. A smaller number received skills training. Most resettlement sites offered health services, education opportunities, and access to fresh water.

The basic strategy of PROFERI continued to guide the repatriation effort, albeit on a scaled-back, largely unofficial basis, limited mainly by Eritrea's shortage of resources. The success of reintegration efforts partially explains why tens of thousands of refugees continued to return home even though they received no repatriation assistance on the Sudan side of the border.

As with its self-operated relief operation during the independence war, Eritrean society demonstrated a remarkable capacity for meeting returnees' needs with little international support during the 1990s. Support for reintegration came mainly from funds contributed by Eritreans living abroad, as well as the limited contributions of UNDP.

However, Eritrea's effective low-budget reintegration program, coupled with the international community's refusal to reward it for a job well done, compounded Eritrean leaders' go-it-alone mentality. In the mid-1990s, the government instituted a national service program that drafted young women and men for military training and reconstruction projects. The government promulgated extensive land reform and ended all food relief to its resident population, except for severely disabled or infirm people and the returning refugees.

The government implemented these policies to curtail dependence on foreign aid and to promote self-reliant national development. In early 1997, the Eritrean government imposed high taxes on expatriate relief employees and sharply restricted the operational role of foreign aid agencies in the country, insisting that they work only through Eritrean counterparts. Most international aid organizations responded by leaving the country.

In a move that demonstrated growing impatience with the international community, the government expelled UNHCR's expatriate personnel in May 1997 on 48 hours notice. Eritrean officials charge that UNHCR's continued pressure on Eritrean relief workers to collaborate with their Sudanese counterparts despite an Eritrean government policy against all contacts with Sudanese officialdom led to the expulsion.



UNHCR staff continue to refuse comment on the incident, on or off the record. Eritrean relief workers who made contact with Sudanese relief workers during this period were suspended from their positions after UNHCR's ouster.

UNHCR's expulsion in 1997 left no communication between Eritrea and Sudan on repatriation issues, and eliminated the primary international agency in Eritrea responsible for refugee matters. Hence, for the first time in a decade, there were no prospects for action from any quarter.

Then came a new and far bloodier crisis between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

IX. MORE WAR WITH ETHIOPIA

A long-simmering border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, coupled with growing tensions over economic and political issues, erupted in May 1998 into a full-scale armed confrontation between the two former allies.

Thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians living along the border were displaced in the first round of fighting. Most sought shelter with friends and relatives in nearby communities. Entire villages pulled back from the most bitterly contested battlefields to makeshift camps in secure areas.

Eritrea's newly displaced population was joined in June 1998 by the first of 72,000 expellees from Ethiopia, as the Ethiopian government rounded up Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, seized their assets, and summarily deported them. Many were farm families who lived near the border. Others were urban workers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and other professionals. (Ethiopian officials charge that Eritrean authorities also deported tens of thousands of Ethiopians during the war, most during the final months of the conflict.)

In February-March 1999, a second round of fighting erupted. Casualties ran into the tens of thousands. Heavy bombardment of border communities generated massive internal displacement—as many as a quarter-million people on each side.

New camps sprang into existence in Eritrea, several in the heart of Gash-Barka Zone where many earlier returnees had settled. A makeshift Eritrean camp near the sparsely settled desert village of Adi Keshi quickly grew to 18,000 residents, making it one of the largest towns in the zone.

The immense scale of the new humanitarian emergency persuaded Eritrean officials to invite inter-

national relief agencies back into the country. Eritrean authorities entered into discussions with bilateral and multilateral donors in an effort to stabilize the shattered economy and dissuade new waves of war-displaced families from fleeing the country.

As emergency aid began to flow into Gash-Barka Zone, the government pushed to include long-term refugees from the liberation war in the mix of beneficiaries. For Eritrean officials, the continued presence of hundreds of thousands of Eritrean refugees in Sudan constituted a festering political problem. Islamist and other Eritrean opposition groups were attempting, with apparent encouragement from the Sudanese government, to recruit followers among the refugees.

Eritrean officials believed that facilitating the refugees' voluntary repatriation and reintegrating them into Eritrean society was the most effective way to counter threats of armed subversion on its borders and deprive Islamist opponents of a potential exile base. The Eritrean government's interest in an accelerated repatriation program increased as Ethiopia reportedly provided bases and radio facilities for Eritrean exile groups opposed to the government.

Accelerated voluntary repatriation of the refugee population was a potentially risky political undertaking, however. If new returnees were to find that economic and social conditions in Eritrea were worse than those the refugees left behind in Sudan, disgruntled and desperate returnees could cause instability inside Eritrea.

By early 2000, Eritrean officials were encouraging repatriation with a heightened concern that the reintegration program be adequately funded for the good of returnees and current residents alike.

X. RESUMING ORGANIZED REPATRIATION... ALMOST

Eritrea and Sudan re-established diplomatic relations in January 2000 after months of bilateral negotiations. Their common motivation was to curb activities by armed opposition groups across their common border.

Eritrea, still at war with Ethiopia in early 2000, could ill afford to face hostile neighbors on two fronts simultaneously. Ethiopia, in fact, had strengthened its relations with Sudan in an effort to open new trade routes and to further isolate Eritrea.

For its part, the Sudanese government was concerned about the growing threat from Sudanese guerrillas operating from bases in western Eritrea. Sudanese opposition forces were striking inside Sudan at the



Post-War Challenges for Residents & Returnees Alike

The streets of Om Hager were empty at the end of February 2001 when UN peacekeepers began to deploy along the disputed frontier between Eritrea and Ethiopia. But there were muted signs of life everywhere.

Though residents were mostly gone, hundreds of cows lay in the shade of the round mud-brick houses at the city's edge. Shards of shattered ceramic water jugs and scraps of rusted metal littered the dirt lanes. A child's green rubber sandal poked out from a swirl of torn paper and charred grass. A broken bed blocked the road.

A handful of people sipped tea at makeshift tables in Om Hager's main square, but the rest of the town's population remained in camps and settlements far away—in the towns of Gergef, Tabaldieh, Gulu, Tesseney, and across the border in Sudan—waiting until the area was declared safe.

As if to underline the danger, an armor-plated Land Rover from the Halo Trust—a British demining unit—was blown up on February 26 while scouting the area for hidden explosives.

Much of the strategic frontier town—captured by Ethiopian troops in May 2000 during the third round of a two-year border war—lay in ruins. Shops were gutted. Doors and window-frames had been ripped from their cement fastenings. Metal roofs were missing.

A mosque sat defaced with trash and human feces. A church hall remained cluttered with bits of clothing and broken straw baskets, evidently used to store personal belongings looted from nearby homes.

The town suffered no fighting between Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, but Ethiopian civilians looted and burned it after the contending armies moved northward. In the aftermath, as peace descended on the battle-weary region, former residents began to trickle back.



highway linking Khartoum with the Red Sea, and at the new oil pipeline from southern Sudan.

To pave the way for improved relations with the Sudanese government, Eritrean authorities closed all training and military bases in Eritrea used by Sudanese guerrillas and insisted that the guerrillas move their facilities inside northeastern Sudan. Although this did not entirely satisfy the Sudanese government, it permitted the Eritrea-Sudan border to re-open to commerce and trade.



Women-headed households make up many of the refugee families returning to Eritrea today. Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell

The re-opened border also enabled Eritrean refugees in Sudan to cross the border legally for the first time in five years to assess the situation in returnee areas of Eritrea.

The Asmara government initiated discussions with Khartoum about the long-delayed return of the refugees and invited UNHCR to draw up plans to bring them back. UNHCR and the governments of Eritrea and Sudan hammered out a tripartite agreement in March 2000 to resume the refugees' voluntary repatriation.

Some 147,000 Eritrean refugees resided in 18 camps in Sudan in early 2000, according to official figures. Up to 195,000 other long-term Eritrean refugees reportedly lived in Sudan's urban centers. Eritrean officials disputed the urban numbers, which were rough estimates by Sudanese authorities.

About 160,000 refugees had indicated in 1998 that they wanted to return to Eritrea through a formal repatriation program. Planners designing a new repatriation plan drew heavily on a 1998 refugee census in the camps that provided useful insights and led to modifications in the PROFERI approach of the mid-1990s.

Demographic data suggested that the Eritrean refugee population in Sudan showed significant social integration among themselves across language, education, and occupational lines. One-third of the refugees were of school age. Primary education was available in all the camps.

However, few of the refugees had achieved meaningful levels of economic self-sufficiency despite their long years in Sudan. This led repatriation planners to conclude that many refugees who previously had been farmers and pastoralists in Eritrea would probably shed their traditional ways of life after repatriation and would likely gravitate toward urban centers upon their return.

This analysis of the refugees' skills and intentions led to a significant change in repatriation strategy that was different from the previous PROFERI program. Repatriation planners in 2000 decided that they



would no longer pre-assign refugee families to settlement sites, nor would they create new settlement sites.

Instead, returning refugees would be allowed to choose their destinations and would be reintegrated into existing communities. Repatriation organizers stated that a “community-based, demand-driven, bottom-up approach” would guide the repatriation program in 2000 and beyond.

The new program outlined three phases of aid. The first phase, known as “initial repatriation and initial relief,” would transport the refugees to Eritrea and address their most immediate food and temporary shelter needs in the first days after arrival. The second phase, “initial reintegration,” would seek to anchor returnees in their new home communities and lay the groundwork for the returnees’ self-sufficiency. The third phase, termed “consolidation of reintegration and rehabilitation,” would seek to ensure that reintegration aid benefited and strengthened entire communities.

According to the plan’s division of responsibilities, UNHCR would be responsible for monitoring and oversight of the overall repatriation and reintegration program. The government’s ERREC agency would coordinate all activities inside Eritrea and implement many of them. Appropriate government ministries would implement health, education, agricultural, and other projects at the local level. Private international and indigenous aid agencies could also play specified roles, but only under ERREC’s umbrella.

By May 2000, all plans were in place and all government and non-government agencies were ready to commence organized repatriation of long-term Eritrean refugees.

Virtually overnight, the repatriation program came to a halt before it actually began.

Ethiopia launched a powerful military offensive with massive air and artillery support in early May along the contested Eritrea-Ethiopia border. Within days, Ethiopian forces broke through into Gash-Barka Zone, advancing on two fronts in a pincer move designed to take control of the region and push inward toward the central highlands.

In response, Eritrean authorities evacuated lowland communities and withdrew to positions around the plateau. By early June, Ethiopian forces drove deep into Gash-Barka Zone, which was virtually emptied of its civilian population. Tens of thousands of Eritreans fled back to Sudan. The exact number of new refugees was again a matter of dispute between Sudan and Eritrea, largely because higher refugee estimates led to larger amounts of emergency relief funding to Sudan.

The governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia reached a truce on June 18. The Ethiopian army occupied large

swaths of Eritrea’s western lowlands and southern border. Residents of decimated villages and towns in the war zone had scattered in all directions. Large areas of the country were heavily mined, especially along the border.

The disengagement pact called for the creation of a 15-mile-wide “temporary security zone” along the border, all of it within Eritrean territory. Once Ethiopian troops withdrew from Eritrea, UN peacekeeping forces were to patrol the buffer zone while a third-party commission adjudicated the border dispute.

Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a formal peace agreement in December 2000. Ethiopian forces pulled out of Eritrea, and UN peacekeepers deployed along the border in February 2001. The two governments continued to argue about the exact border between them. No more shooting occurred, however, and many observers gained confidence that the truce would hold.

With the bloodshed halted, attention turned to the multi-layered humanitarian problems facing Eritrea.

As the dust and smoke cleared, the country was reeling. More than a million people had been displaced—nearly a third of Eritrea’s population. Tens of thousands of people were wounded, many of them permanently disabled.

Infrastructure was badly damaged even where no fighting had occurred. Roads and bridges across Gash-Barka Zone were destroyed, schools and clinics wrecked, whole villages and towns looted, fields burned, and farm equipment ruined.

The serious disruption of the annual summer planting season—the worst short-term problem—meant little or no harvest for 2000. At the same time, thousands of Eritreans who fled to Sudan in May, many for the second or third time, were trying to make their way back home without international assistance.

The harsh conditions inside Eritrea in late 2000 triggered debate about whether long-term Eritrean refugees (those who fled the independence war, not the more recent war) should be encouraged to repatriate. Some in the international community argued for a delay, at least until the situation in the prime returnee area of Gash-Barka Zone stabilized.

Eritrean officials disagreed with another repatriation delay. They urged a program of rapid voluntary repatriation of long-term refugees despite conditions inside Eritrea.

Eritrean government planners argued that blending the long-term refugees into a comprehensive reconstruction and rehabilitation program offered the best chance to reintegrate them into the home culture and to diminish the potential for political problems if the refugees remained outside the country.



XI. VIEW FROM ASMARA: HOW TO MAKE REPATRIATION WORK

How rapidly should long-term Eritrean refugees be encouraged to repatriate to their war-damaged homeland? How easily will Eritrean returnees integrate economically and socially into a highly unified country after decades in exile? Can Eritrean returnees become self-sufficient after years of dependency on international aid? Will current Eritrean residents—renowned for their independence and resourcefulness—welcome returning refugees who were absent during the country’s reconstruction from the independence war?

Although most Eritreans and international observers agree that the voluntary return home of Eritrea’s long-term refugees is long overdue, many questions remain about the best way to facilitate the refugee population’s large-scale return and their potentially difficult reintegration into Eritrean life.

Eritrea faces grim post-war conditions in the aftermath of its just-concluded war with Ethiopia. This raises concerns about the proper timing of an organized repatriation program. Some international donors and aid workers advise a delay in the repatriation program until Eritrean society recovers from the devastation wreaked by its border war with Ethiopia.

Many Eritrean officials insist that the time to launch an organized repatriation is now—immediately. They complain that delays by the international community have already persisted too long, dating back to the early 1990s after the independence war and again when the Eritrean government devised the ambitious PROFERI repatriation program that garnered only tepid international support.

The most cynical Eritrean officials interpret any further repatriation slowdowns as a ploy by the international community that, in their view, is either biased against Eritrea or too cheap to support a repatriation program at any time. This view is rooted in Eritreans’ memory of the years that passed with little or no help from many of the same donor nations and other funding sources that currently balk at supporting a repatriation program now.

Few Eritrean officials seriously believe that donors would provide more resources in the future if repatriation is delayed yet again.

“What we are hearing from the donors now—about our resources, our capacity—is also what we heard in 1994,” said ERREC program director Mehrteab Fessehaye. “But we did [repatriation] then, and we can

do it now. There are difficulties, but to be home is a step forward.”

Mehrteab told USCR that blending the returnees into Eritrea’s current post-war, community-based reconstruction and rehabilitation program offers the best opportunity to reintegrate them into the economy and the home culture. The very instability inherent in the country’s overlapping crises will actually help promote returnees’ rapid cultural and social reintegration, he said, because so many current Eritrean residents have needs similar to returnees.

Mehrteab’s viewpoint is common in Eritrea, where concerns about ensuring returnees’ proper social integration into Eritrea’s tight-knit society weigh more heavily on Eritrean officials than do the concerns about returnees’ economic adjustments that tend to dominate the thinking of non-Eritrean repatriation planners.

The legacy of mistrust between Eritrean officials and the international community is another factor that could affect repatriation and reintegration programs. While Eritreans often view donors and international aid workers as slow, undependable, and presumptuous, many expatriates bitterly remember when the Eritrean government booted international humanitarian agencies out of the country years ago, and the government’s rigorous monitoring of all aid efforts.

Years of unsatisfying relationships between the Eritrean government and the international community threaten to undermine coordination among various government ministries, UN agencies, and private international organizations involved in Eritrea’s recovery programs, warns World Bank representative Emanuel Ablo.

“We have returnees, internally displaced persons, demobilized soldiers, and others to deal with,” Ablo told USCR in Eritrea. “At least we have realized that all these people are going back to the same communities, so we have to deal with all of them together. But this government prefers to deal with all the international agencies separately, trying to control them, and this can be counterproductive. There are no planning forums where all the agencies involved sit together.”

The Eritrean government, for example, asked Oxfam/United Kingdom (UK) to leave the country in 1997 because of disagreements. That experience has caused Oxfam as well as the Eritrean government to eye each other cautiously, acknowledged Oxfam’s Rosemary Nabatzni.

By early 2001, Oxfam was re-involved in public health projects and the provision of potable water in several camps for displaced Eritreans, but the agency was still hesitant about becoming involved in repatria-



tion programs and was unlikely to participate in such a large undertaking until the Eritrean government clarified its constraints on international aid agencies.

“All the NGOs [non-governmental humanitarian organizations] here are wary of long-term commitments until the government comes out with a clear policy and a legal framework for our work—a document that also governs their operations,” Nabatznzi told USCR. “We lost a lot of equipment and staff resources in 1997 [when forced out of the country], and we do not want to go through this again.”

Despite such reservations, more than a dozen international relief workers interviewed by USCR in Eritrea during early 2001 generally agreed with Eritrean authorities that repatriation of long-term refugees should proceed sooner rather than later.

“I think it’s risky to be bringing them back right now. There’s so much else going on—the return of the internally displaced persons, proposed demobilization, drought conditions, uncertainty over the peace deal and the expellees,” acknowledged Jeff Shannon, representative of the Eritrean Development Foundation. “But when will conditions ever be more conducive? They’ve been waiting 20-30 years! While the humanitarian community is here, let’s do it.”

Only one agency representative interviewed by USCR in Eritrea urged a deliberate delay in organized repatriation. “This is a case where everyone could benefit from ‘rushing slowly’—from the reconcilia-

tion issue to the problem of funding,” the agency representative said, urging a postponement of up to a year. “Let us do the planning, prepare the host communities and the returnees, and accumulate proper funding.”

The World Bank’s Ablo, though not directly involved in the repatriation program, favored moving ahead with it now, but he suggested a cautious approach. “We need to move in a phased, orderly manner,” he told USCR. “We need to test the ground to see if the structures in Gash-Barka are strong enough to reintegrate these people into Eritrean society. We should really try and make sure they’re not disadvantaged by rushing into a big program that is poorly managed and poorly funded.”

Regardless of the timing of repatriation, Eritrean officials as well as international aid workers express concern that many long-term refugees have become so dependent on aid in Sudan that they might struggle to adjust to Eritrea’s spartan, do-it-yourself culture.

“We want these people to be self-sufficient—to break the cycle of dependency,” said Eritrea’s Minister of Health, Saleh Meki. “If these people are planning to sit and rot, there will be a serious problem. If they settle and start working for themselves, we will solve this quickly.”

“These [refugees] have been dependent all their lives on one kind of aid or another,” said Bruce MacInnis, of Save the Children Federation in Asmara. MacInnis worked with Eritrean refugees in northeast

Building Bridges-Eritrea and UNHCR

Although acrimony between Eritrean officials and UNHCR resulted in the ouster of UNHCR’s international staff members from Eritrea in 1997, the agency’s local staff and its stock of equipment remained behind.

With the onset of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in mid-1998, officials in Eritrea used UNHCR vehicles to aid war-displaced civilians, with the proviso that such use be carefully audited. Both sides abided by this.

In 1999, UNHCR sent several missions to visit Eritrea and slowly renewed its operations. Late that year, UNHCR responded to requests from Eritrean officials that the agency become involved in reopening a dialogue with Sudan about the return of long-term refugees from Eritrea’s independence war. After the two governments reached an agreement, UNHCR began raising funds for the refugees’ repatriation.

When nearly a million Eritreans fled an invasion by Ethiopian troops in May 2000, the Eritrean government asked for UNHCR’s help amid the humanitarian emergency. Although aid to internally displaced persons falls outside the normal mandate of UNHCR, the agency provided substantial assistance to Eritrea’s displaced population by tapping funds previously reserved for repatriation of refugees.

These joint efforts have apparently moved UNHCR and the Eritrean government beyond their contentious past and laid the groundwork for collaboration in the repatriation of long-term Eritrean refugees during 2001-02.



Sudan in the early 1990s. “If they come back, they’ll be given a resettlement package and have to be independent for the first time. That will be a big adjustment. For the students, there will be the added adjustment of changing from one curriculum to another. This will be very difficult.”

Indigenous Eritrean organizations such as the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) have large grassroots memberships and extensive programs in returnee communities. These local groups could play a critical role in easing the cultural transition awaiting returnees who have not lived in Eritrea for decades, if ever.

The challenge poses both a problem as well as an opportunity, according to some.

“Eritrean society is now a kind of mosaic,” Luel Gebreab, chairperson of NUEW, told USCR. “Our people are in Eritrea, in camps, [living] abroad, in Ethiopia, on the front lines. So many have been affected by Ethiopian atrocities. Why did these refugees leave [during the liberation war]? Their villages were plundered, there was fighting, their animals were bombarded—just like the rest of us. This brings us all together.”

However, long-term refugees will have to change their expectations, she warned.

“The lifestyle change is the bigger issue,” explained Luel, who, like most Eritreans, uses her first name for formal address. Long-term refugees “have been exposed to a new way of living—to a more settled way of life with many services available to them. They will expect schools, health centers, etc. How will they adjust to a situation of self-reliance when they are accustomed to having umbrella organizations responsible for them?”

“We need to let them know that support will be there for them for a fixed period. Then they are on their own,” Luel said. “I expect they will be influenced by their host communities and by seeing the lives around them.”

Luel predicted that her organization and other local groups could help returnees adjust if such groups receive adequate support from funders.

Eritrea’s national youth organization, NUEYS, has already reached out to youths in the Sudan refugee camps and had active branches there before the break in relations between Eritrea and Sudan. Eritrean youth leaders on both sides of the border have kept in contact, and refugee youth representatives have already visited Eritrea for orientation about what to expect when they repatriate permanently.

Despite those efforts, NUEYS head Shengeb Moheidin shared concerns about the considerable cul-

tural differences between the returnees and their new communities.

“These are no longer the same people who left the country 20 years back,” Shengeb told USCR. “A new generation has been born there, and they have changed their lifestyle while they have been there. It will be much more difficult to reintegrate them than others who have been displaced or who were out of the country for a short time.

“Sudan itself is very different from here, especially in the last 11 years [of National Islamic Front rule],” Shengeb continued. “We don’t know the changes in these people due to this. Integration will be a challenge. Providing them with land, basic support, training will be easy. Changing the values and the attitudes and behaviors will be the hard part.”

Shengeb points out that much of the refugee population in Sudan has received only minimal aid in recent years and therefore might be better equipped to achieve self-sufficiency than realized. But he warns that Eritrean refugees will initially feel like aliens in their own country after they return.

“It is the cultural aspect—identity and character. A sense of belonging to the nation is not there in the way it is for us here. They will not at first consider themselves a part of this society. And the same may be true of peoples’ attitudes here toward them.”

XII. COME HOME AND WORK HARD: GASH-BARKA ZONE

Gash-Barka Zone is the area of Eritrea most devastated by the recent war with Ethiopia. It is also the likely destination for three-fourths of the long-term refugees who plan to repatriate.

Preparations for the refugees’ eventual return were well underway when USCR visited the region in early 2001. Despite extensive war damage and resource shortages, local officials in Gash-Barka were confident that they could cope with an influx of returning refugees.

In fact, the region was already dealing with the challenge as short-term refugees from the border war and long-term refugees from the independence war were arriving spontaneously each day. Local officials were preparing for more.

Some 25,000 spontaneous returnees have registered since 1999 while passing through the town of Tessenei, the main transit point for returnees. Many arrived before the border war created a new exodus back into Sudan during May and June 2000.



We're All Children of Eritrea

Idris Abdella, 47, first fled to Sudan in 1967 when Ethiopian aircraft bombed his highland village. Eight years later, he returned to Eritrea to settle in the border hamlet of Gergef, only to flee again in May 2000 when Ethiopian forces captured the area.

But his early experience as a returning refugee has convinced Idris that the forthcoming repatriation effort can succeed. He believes that Eritrean refugees who stay in Sudan probably suffer a far worse fate than a difficult reintegration into Eritrea. In Sudan, he says, soldiers and local officials prey upon the refugees with apparent impunity.

"It was bad," says Idris of his recent flight to Sudan because of the border war. He says he fled Gergef last year with his wife and two children, but with little else.

"The Sudanese soldiers would take our clothes. They would take anything, coming and going. One teacher from Haykota—Osman Omer—came here to be with his family when the war broke out. When he got to the border and resisted attempts to take his money, they took his watch and shot him in the hand."

Before the Gergef residents fled last year, adds Idris, Ethiopian troops rounded them up and an Eritrean Islamist rebel named Hamed Mohammed called upon the farmers to rise up against the government in Asmara. But the rebel leader found no new followers, Idris says. Instead, the rebel commander outraged local residents by associating himself with the invading army.

The rebel leader later appeared with nine of his followers at the Lafa camp inside Sudan, Idris says.

Idris remained in Sudan only two months this time. He returned home after the Ethiopian military pulled out of his town. Eritrean officials provided emergency rations when the residents returned.

"Our problem now is that we don't have a harvest," he says. "We don't have goats. We don't have goods in our shops. We don't have things in our houses. But I think we can work together with those coming back from Sudan to prepare the next harvest, if we get help now."

Idris says that new returnees from Sudan will fit in easily despite their long years away and the disastrous state of the economy.

"We're all children of Eritrea," he says. "We all know hunger. We know need. It is not new to us. We will pull through this, just as we have before. Just give us peace. If we have peace, we can face anything that comes our way."



When the formal repatriation program for long-term refugees resumes, the numbers of returnees and their rate of return will accelerate dramatically.

A week-long USCR tour of war-affected communities in Gash-Barka in early 2001 found most administrators and residents surprisingly upbeat about the imminent return of long-term refugees. Current residents say the returnees are needed to help repair destruction from the recent fighting and put the region—Eritrea’s breadbasket—back on the road to economic recovery.

“We want them to come back, though the aid is not here waiting,” said one farmer in the village of Gergef, himself a recent returnee from the latest fighting. “We will help them build their houses and their shops. After that, they will have to farm just like us, but this is not a problem. The land is here. There is water.”

“Now [the refugees] are just sitting there” in Sudan, said Idris Kamis, an Eritrean government administrator in Aredda. “We need to get this [repatriation] finished.”

The worst war damage occurred in larger towns occupied by Ethiopian forces during May-June 2000. In Barentu, the capital of Gash-Barka Zone, the war

and occupation burned schools and clinics, destroyed a new hotel, and damaged government buildings.

In Ali Ghidir, the largest irrigated agricultural site in Eritrea, farm equipment lay in mangled heaps while gaping holes left cement storage sheds open to the elements. Throughout the region, bridges and telecommunications facilities were wrecked, offices and businesses destroyed, and homes and shops looted.

Yet reconstruction was well-advanced by early 2001.

Two main bridges over the Gash River, destroyed during the Ethiopian army’s occupation, have been replaced with pre-fabricated steel structures. A new hotel has opened in Barentu, and a new hospital with training facilities for nurses and paramedics is under construction there.

Work has resumed for the first time in two years on the road linking the towns of Barentu and Tessenei—the main route across Gash-Barka Zone. Telecommunications were functioning by early 2001, with new internet cafes in Tessenei and Barentu.

USCR’s site visit found that reconstruction efforts were also progressing in villages and smaller settlements. Round, mud-brick houses with conical thatched-grass roofs are the norm there. Residents



Ethiopian military forces destroyed farm equipment at the Ali Ghidir plantation in western Eritrea after occupying the town in May 2000. Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell



Key Target for Returnees: Rebuilding the Town of Tessenei

The town of Tessenei in western Eritrea is not a particularly noteworthy place. But soon it will be a boom town. It is expected to nearly double in size by mid-2002 as thousands of long-term Eritrean refugees return there to rebuild their lives.

During Eritrea's long independence war, Tessenei changed hands four times. Residents of the town hurriedly fled into Sudan each time.

During the final gasp of Eritrea's more recent border war with Ethiopia in May-June 2000, the town changed hands twice more, forcing most of the 20,000-plus residents to flee again to Sudan. Most residents returned to Tessenei soon after the June 2000 truce, and others continue to trickle back.

The repatriation that would transform Tessenei—and numerous other Eritrean villages in coming months—is the long-awaited return of long-term refugees from the independence struggle. About 18,000 such refugees, still in Sudan, have indicated that Tessenei is their preferred destination for rebuilding their lives after they repatriate.

The town is a warren of mostly single-story mud-brick buildings that mirrors its Sudanese counterpart, Kassala, only 30 miles to the west. The rutted dirt lanes of Tessenei are lined with small stores, hotels, open-air restaurants, homes and offices, repair shops, service stations, bustling markets. Heaps of rubble are visible from the recent conflict.

"We still have a lot to do here," city administrator Mohammed Said Montai told USCR in February 2001. "Schools and offices were destroyed, desks were burned, roofs were taken. Everything they could carry they took," he said, blaming both Ethiopian soldiers and the Ethiopian civilians he claims followed the troops to loot captured communities.

"What was not easy to take, they burned. They also moved goods from house to house, wherever they slept, so people come back and find things in their homes that they never saw before—broken furniture, carts, clothes," Mohammed said.

Post-war reconstruction in Tessenei is well-advanced. Residents have rebuilt houses and shops, regraded roads, and repaired communications—including a new internet connection.

Meanwhile, reports indicate that conditions for long-term Eritrean refugees in Sudan have deteriorated.

"People keep coming back now because the economic and political situation in Sudan is bad," said Mohammed. He added that many old-caseload refugees were scouting Tessenei to report back to families and fellow refugees awaiting the right moment for return to Eritrea.

have repaired many houses that suffered damage in the war from vandalism or disuse while residents were uprooted. New houses are also visible.

Shops in the small rural villages of Gash-Barka Zone appear well-stocked. Farmers were preparing the land for the 2001 crop cycle during USCR's visit. Schools and health facilities are functioning, although many are overcrowded because repairs and reconstruction have temporarily taken some buildings out of use.

Villagers point out that conditions they faced at the end of the long independence war ten years ago were far worse than what they must endure now. The Eritrean government is also better able to coordinate reconstruction efforts now than it was a decade ago.

In early 2001, nearly 30 international aid agencies were providing emergency assistance to inter-

nally displaced persons still in camps or were assisting in reconstruction work in home communities. Prominent among them were UNDP and UNICEF; Italian, German, and Danish development agencies linked to their respective governments; the European consortium, ACORD; and more than 30 Italian, British, Scandinavian, and other NGOs. The UN peacekeeping force (the UN Mission for Eritrea and Ethiopia, UNMEE, with more than 35 countries involved) is also carrying out so-called Quick Impact Projects in areas where some of the returnees will settle.

UNICEF will conduct reconstruction projects for education, health, water, and sanitation in Gash-Barka Zone, and will run a training program for counselors treating the psycho-social effects of war on children. UNICEF's country director, Dr. Festo



"Better in the War Zone Than This"



Kadidja Romedan Idris, 34, is one of the reasons the repatriation program will work

The sole provider for her four children, Kadidja is also a community leader in Ali Ghidir, a prime settlement site for returning refugees. She knows what they have been through. She was a refugee herself, more than once.

Kadidja will be a key figure in assisting them through the difficult transition they face.

Kadidja fled her home village as a child when fighting erupted there in the 1960s. She has twice sought refuge in Sudan, once as a young mother during the 1984-85 famine, the second time during the fighting in May 2000.

She returned to Eritrea for the first time in the early 1990s, when Gash-Barka Zone was in even worse shape than today. Kadidja was one of the first short-term refugees to come back home in July 2000 after Ethiopian troops withdrew from her town.

Her tenacity has won her the respect of her peers. Six years ago, she was elected to the Gash-Barka *bitoh* (regional assembly). Her neighbors later re-elected her with 92 percent of the votes.

Kadidja's recent experience as a refugee left her with bitter memories of Sudan and heightened her concern for her compatriots who are still there.

"I was here in this house on May 17 when they [Ethiopian forces] came. We decided to go to Sudan because we were worried about our children," she says.

Her first night in Sudan, a tanker truck delivered "very bad" water to the new refugee population, she says.

"The next day, trucks came with food, throwing it out in all directions. The children ran to get it, but we were afraid they'd be crushed by the trucks, so we pulled them back. Those who didn't jump and grab didn't get anything. Those who did got it all. We just sat quietly and didn't say anything," she recalls.

"The second night at 8 o'clock, some Sudanese soldiers came into the camp and kidnapped eight women. As they were trying to take another one, she started screaming. All the people came out to surround the soldiers and said, 'You can't do this to us, you can't treat our women like this.' So we let half the soldiers go, but they brought only five women back. We never saw the others," she says. "Every night after that, women were on guard."

Kadidja soon decided to return to her homeland.

"Finally, we said it is better to be back in the war zone than to live like this, so we came back to Telatasher, where we got food and water from our government," she says.

Some of her neighbors refused to repatriate at first because Ethiopian soldiers still occupied areas near their village. "So I came alone with my children. At first," she says, "we slept on a rusted metal plate from my bed with only one straw mat, but slowly the situation improved, and I am confident now.

"We have learned that with sacrifice and struggle, one can have anything in this world."



Kavishe, says that the programs will include returning refugees among the beneficiaries.

“We will not make any distinctions in any of our programs among the returnees, the displaced, or others,” he explained.

UNDP program director Simon Nhongo echoed this sentiment. “We are trying to avoid any distinction among those in need. Anyone returning home is eligible for assistance,” he said.

The biggest reconstruction problems facing residents and returnees in Gash-Barka Zone are found in the border areas with Ethiopia, where destruction is most severe and thousands of landmines keep many displaced residents from returning home. The landmines also prevent aid agencies from starting rehabilitation projects.

The locations of minefields along the border are unmapped. Eritrea lacks trained experts to find and remove the mines, which means that many landmines might remain in place and dangerous to returnees for years to come.

Local officials say that most basic infrastructure built or expanded in the Gash-Barka region since 1991 remains intact, including roads, communications, water supply, health facilities, schools, and housing. They point out that a highly developed political and organizational infrastructure is in place to deal with the

crises there—experienced local and regional administrators, local offices of government ministries, associations of women and youths with branches throughout the zone, and an experienced cadre of relief workers. All are engaged in reconstruction.

“We’ve done this before and succeeded,” said Mohamed Ali Ibrahim, government administrator of Telatasher. “We will do it again.”

XIII. NO MORE WAITING: REPATRIATION PLAN FOR 2001-2002

An official plan is in place to repatriate Eritrean refugees from Sudan. What remains to be seen is how well the official plan will be supported by international donors and implemented by government officials, aid workers, and the refugees themselves.

The official repatriation plan signed in March 2001 by UNHCR and the governments of Eritrea and Sudan called for a new survey of all Eritrean refugees in Sudan to determine who wants to repatriate and who prefers to remain in Sudan.

Those who choose to repatriate will undergo an orientation in Sudan involving presentations by Eritrean officials, UNHCR, and NGO representatives. Refugees



Refugee families returning from Sudan have to rebuild their lives and livelihoods from scratch
Photo credit: USCR/D. Connell.



Repatriation Principles

Summary of Repatriation Agreement Signed by UNHCR, Sudan, Eritrea March 22, 2001

RETURNEE DESTINATIONS IN ERITREA

- Refugees will be free to choose their final destinations within Eritrea.
- Repatriation will be to existing communities. No new settlements planned.

OVERALL OBJECTIVES

- Facilitate safe and dignified return of all Eritrean refugees who wish to return to Eritrea voluntarily.
- Ensure that returnees enjoy same rights and protections as other citizens of Eritrea, without discrimination.
- Enable returnees to reintegrate into Eritrean communities in a sustainable manner.

TARGETS

- 160,000 repatriations during April 2001 to December 2002. Includes 62,000 repatriations planned for 2001, plus remaining repatriations in 2002.
- UNHCR and the two governments will meet before end of 2002 to discuss status of remaining Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

opting for repatriation will again have an opportunity to choose their final destinations in Eritrea in case they have changed their minds since a similar 1998 survey.

Refugees who return to Eritrea will receive a two-month food supply from the World Food Program before leaving Sudan, according to the repatriation plan. Returnees will receive an additional 10 months of food aid from WFP after settling in Eritrea.

Preparations to register the large wave of expected returnees began in early 2001. ERREC constructed large dormitories at the main reception center in Tessenei, the main cross-border transit point. At Tessenei, returnees will receive health check-ups and mine awareness briefings, according to the repatriation plan. Trucks will then transport the refugees to their final destinations in Eritrea.

A family of five will receive a “re-integration package” that includes a tent, three blankets, household utensils, farm tools, and a cash grant equivalent to \$200. Although many returnees are likely to choose to live in towns and cities, returnees who choose to live in rural areas will receive land for farming and assistance clearing and plowing it, according to the plan.

Eritrean officials emphasize that they have already completed the difficult task of surveying and reserving plots of land for use by returnees. ERREC

began stockpiling repatriation supplies in early 2001, including tents, utensils, and tools. Some gaps in preparation will occur, however. Returnees will find that many community services are weak. Schools may be overcrowded. Clinics might be over-stretched and understaffed for the increased population. Some communities might lack sufficient potable water, though no large-scale health problems are anticipated.

Indigenous Eritrean humanitarian organizations have resurrected assistance programs that they put on hold in mid-2000 because of the Eritrea-Ethiopia war.

“We were working [in early 2000] on agricultural development projects—ten hectares of land, a diesel pump for irrigating. And we planned to organize technical skills training programs—six months long for apprentices in different trades,” said Romedan Saleh, program director for the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) in Gash-Barka Zone. Those long-planned projects will expand as the number of returnees grows during 2001 and 2002.

“We [have] prepared for training in carpentry, electricity, auto-mechanics, sewing, and embroidery,” Romedan said. “Each student [will] get 300 *nakfa* (\$30) every month for pocket money, and at the end they [will] get a certificate and look for work. We even [will have] group discussions among the students here



to prepare them for those who were coming. We can still do this.”

Romedan, like many Eritreans interviewed by USCR, stressed the importance of helping returnees to assimilate socially into a homeland that many returnees have barely seen or experienced.

“Our plan is to have cultural lessons on Eritrean history and on the different ethnic groups we have,” he stated. “We will organize small group trips to other parts of the country to show them the people, the cities and towns, the country as it is.”

A majority of the expected 160,000 returnees during 2001-02 are expected to settle in Gash-Barka Zone. The governor of Gash-Barka, Mustafa Nur Hussein, said that the government is ready to accommodate the returnees.

“We are expecting 104,000 refugees to come back to 26 to 28 sites [in Gash-Barka], most of them in existing towns and villages,” Mustafa said. “We have already studied these sites, so we know what to expect.” He predicts that returnees who opt to live in rural locations will adjust well, while those settling into crowded towns will encounter larger adjustment problems.

Although officials have based their official repatriation and reintegration model on years of planning, the actual movement of large numbers of returnees poses numerous uncertainties.

It remains unknown, for example, precisely how many of the estimated quarter-million long-term refugees in Sudan will choose to repatriate. Some Eritrean refugees who registered in 1997 to repatriate might now choose to stay in Sudan; others who did not previously sign up to return might choose to repatriate now.

It also is uncertain where many returnees will choose to settle. Most donor agencies are focused on reintegration programs in rural areas, while returnees to urban areas could encounter difficulties that planners and donors have failed to anticipate.

It is also possible that a significant number of refugees will rush to repatriate on their own without awaiting transport on a UNHCR convoy, particularly if they believe that resettlement and reintegration projects are working smoothly. Such spontaneous returns, while perfectly legal and rational, could place a hefty burden on resources and facilities inside Eritrea, particularly in urban centers where government officials and donor agencies appear to be less prepared.

For these reasons, government and aid officials believe it is crucial to retain a degree of flexibility and adequate funding reserves to address unforeseen problems as repatriation and reintegration accelerate in the coming months.

Return to Eritrea: Repatriation Checklist

Pre-Departure Phase (in Sudan)

- Information campaign and counseling
- Registration for voluntary repatriation
- Documentation and de-registration from Sudan
- Health screening
- Two-month food package before departure from Sudan

Movement Phase

- Organized transportation convoys for returnees & their belongings
- Arrival at reception centers in Eritrea
- Help for returnees with special needs

Reception and Transport to Final Destination (in Eritrea)

- Meals, water, health care, and sanitary facilities at reception center in Tessenei
- Registration, documentation, health checks, and warnings about landmines
- Organized transport to final destination in Eritrea

Initial Reintegration Assistance

(per 5-person family)

- Reintegration package: 3 blankets, 2 mosquito nets, kerosene stove, water barrel, tent, set of hand-tools (axe, sickle, shovel, pick axe), and cash grant equivalent to \$200
- 10-month food supply and access to food-for-work programs
- Aid projects to communities receiving returnees: water/sanitation, health care, education
- Allocation of specific house sites and agricultural land

Medium-to-Long Term Reintegration

- Incorporation of returnees in ongoing national reconstruction & development activities
- Additional reconstruction & development projects necessitated by repatriation



XIV. CONCLUSION

How can countries, scarred by the effects of war, insecurity, landmines, and poverty, burdened with the problem of demobilized soldiers and displaced civilians, be realistically expected to absorb those who return, when they are hardly able to sustain those who remained? The Horn of Africa is but one example of many. Are we not simply creating new and more tragic emergencies? And at what cost to the peace process in these countries? As conflicts are resolved, countries must be rebuilt, so that they can begin to support once again their own population, including the returning refugees and displaced persons... The link between reintegration of refugees and national post-conflict reconstruction is thus of paramount importance.

— Madame Sadako Ogata, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1994)

UNHCR initially appealed to international donors for \$24.7 million to cover the costs of repatriation to Eritrea in 2001.

By mid-2001, UNHCR had scaled back its funding request to \$18 million, but officials of UNHCR in Asmara say they will need at least \$24 million in 2002 for the repatriation of 90,000 to 100,000 refugees scheduled to return to Eritrea then.

The single largest expense in the UNHCR funding appeal in 2001 is for shelter and other infrastructure (\$6.2 million). The second largest expense is transport for returnees (\$4.2 million). UNHCR says it needs \$3.7 million for projects to assist returnees with income generation and legal assistance, \$1.9 million for returnees' household needs, and \$1.6 million for water projects. The agency estimates it will require \$1 million for health projects, \$1 million for education programs, and \$1 million for and monitoring activities.

Given the heavy competition for emergency funds worldwide, early indications suggest that UNHCR's financial appeal for Eritrean repatriation might receive only a portion of the monies it needs.

UNHCR began final preparations for the return program in early 2001 with only \$6.2 million culled from its own reserves and a combined \$2 million provided by three donor nations, including \$1.5 million from Sweden. By July 2001, pledges totaled \$11.6 million, including promises from Japan, Germany, and the United States, which contributed \$4.5 million.

It remains uncertain how repatriation and reintegration will unfold if anticipated funding shortfalls

materialize. Officials expressed concern, for example, that refugees who repatriate after the summer planting season would struggle for self-sufficiency.

UNHCR and Eritrean officials also must consider where they can find support for the second year of repatriation operations, in 2002, when funding needs are likely to exceed \$24 million.

Few aid experts or Eritrean officials believe that cancellation of organized repatriation in 2001 would produce better international funding or easier political circumstances for repatriation in 2002. Further delays, officials say, would be a huge missed opportunity and might prove counterproductive to an Eritrean society that finally seems more than ready to assimilate all its people for the arduous task of national reconstruction.

Given its determination to facilitate repatriation and reintegration without delay, the Eritrean government is likely to proceed with the repatriation program regardless of funding levels. Eritrean officials will likely respond to funding shortfalls by attempting to sustain repatriation by shifting funds from other programs and scaling back services where necessary, much as authorities did when thousands of refugees returned spontaneously in the 1990s with little targeted international assistance.

Eritrea is an unusually resilient nation that has demonstrated its ability to respond effectively to emergencies and to manage an organized repatriation program. But getting the refugees home—a difficult task—is only half the challenge.

Helping the returnee population become self-sustaining, productive members of Eritrean society and facilitating their social and cultural integration remain the other half of the challenge.

It is, arguably, the far more difficult part of the repatriation process.

Eritrean officials express confidence that a coordinated strategy of community development is the surest route to stability in their war-damaged country. They have fashioned a strategy that would assist—simultaneously—post war Eritrea's many overlapping vulnerable populations, including returnees from the independence war, families made homeless by the recent border war, internally displaced persons, stateless expellees from Ethiopia, and impoverished long-time residents.

Many Eritreans firmly believe that their cherished goal of social cohesion will best emerge from a rapid repatriation program that enables all Eritreans to work together in a shared effort to rebuild their homeland and stitch their society back together.

The time for waiting and delay, they believe, is over.



XV. USCR RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Fundamental Strategy

1. The long-delayed program to repatriate 160,000 long-term Eritrean refugees from Sudan should begin as soon as possible.

Facilitating voluntary repatriation to war-damaged areas of Eritrea might seem counter-intuitive at first glance, but rapid voluntary repatriation of refugees can—if properly conducted—actually help the country's reconstruction and enhance returnees' cultural assimilation.

The voluntary repatriation program to Eritrea should take advantage of the diplomatic and humanitarian window of opportunity that now exists: refugees want to repatriate; Eritrean officials are eager to facilitate repatriation; the governments of Eritrea and Sudan are cooperating with each other and with UNHCR; UN peacekeepers are patrolling the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia; dozens of aid agencies are in Eritrea to assist with post-war relief and reconstruction; and many Eritreans are convinced that repatriation at this time will strengthen social and cultural cohesion among returnees and other Eritreans.

2. The international community should respond rapidly to the current UNHCR funding appeal and be prepared to provide additional support in 2002.

Donors should respond immediately and generously to UNHCR's appeal for repatriation and reintegration of 62,000 refugees in 2001, which has been scaled back from \$24 million to \$18 million. Donor nations should provide additional support in 2002, when another 90,000 to 100,000 repatriations are expected, at a likely cost of \$24 million.

Proper support from donors will enable Eritrean refugees to end their decades-long dependence on donated relief. A successful repatriation program will reduce what has been a source of regional political friction and instability, and will position UNHCR to end the longest-running assistance program in the agency's history.

3. International donors should commit to multi-year funding for reintegration and reconstruction in Eritrea. International aid agencies should commit to multi-year projects.

Achieving social stability in Eritrea is a multi-year task that is key to peace throughout the region.

It is crucial that returnees receive support so that they can become self-sustaining economically as pastoralists and farmers, as skilled and semi-skilled wage laborers, as craftspeople and small traders. International donors should provide continuing support beyond 2001 for agricultural extension programs, restocking of animals, retraining of workers, and other rehabilitation programs.

Without such programs, substantial future population migrations are inevitable.

4. The Eritrean government, UN agencies, and international and local NGOs should coordinate closely throughout the reintegration and reconstruction programs. They should address unforeseen needs flexibly.

Proper coordination of large-scale humanitarian programs is difficult. In Eritrea, a history of strained relations between the government and aid agencies means that new coordination breakdowns could lead to cancellation of entire projects.

Donor agencies should recognize that Eritrean society possesses a high level of competency, lack of corruption, and enthusiasm for responsibility—characteristics that offer a foundation for a model emergency response.

Eritrean authorities should realize that the international humanitarian community is not inherently biased against Eritrea and that aid agencies have skills and considerable experience to offer in addition to money.

5. Eritrea should undertake a massive infrastructure repair and reconstruction program, with support from international donors.

Eritreans need basic health care, education, transport, and communications infrastructure to stabilize reintegration. The reconstruction currently underway requires additional funding.



A hospital is under construction in Barentu. Rural roads and bridges have been repaired throughout Gash-Barka Zone. Schools and clinics have been restocked. Many other projects await attention, however. Rapid international assistance is needed to resume construction work as quickly as possible in September, after the rainy season.

B. Improved Relations on Assistance Programs

6. International donors and humanitarian aid organizations should respect and encourage Eritrea's deep-rooted commitment to national self-reliance and its track record of effective, corruption-free relief and rehabilitation work.

Eritreans prefer to help themselves. The Eritrean government and indigenous NGOs normally take responsibility for designing and implementing aid programs in their country. Eritrea has a well-educated cadre of skilled people. Recent expellees from Ethiopia who have settled in Eritrea—including former government officials, project managers, businesspeople, and other professionals—constitute a significant pool of talent.

International donors and NGOs that operate in Eritrea usually find it necessary to fundamentally change their perspective. International agencies are required to relinquish full control of aid projects and are asked to play a limited role that consists of funding, monitoring, and evaluation.

International aid workers should expect the Eritrean government and Eritrean NGOs to be more than equal partners in reintegration and reconstruction programs. International aid agencies can expect to receive assignments that are not agencies' first choices. Providing training as needed to Eritreans should be a priority.

7. The Eritrean government should respond fully and effectively to the needs of donors and international aid agencies.

Eritrean officials insist on control over aid and reconstruction projects. In exchange, Eritrean authorities should give international donors and aid

organizations free and open access to program sites, and should plan and operate reintegration and reconstruction programs with full transparency. Eritrean officials should produce comprehensive, timely reports in a format that meets the needs of cooperating agencies and international donors.

This level of cooperation often failed to occur during previous periods of tension between the Eritrean government and international humanitarian organizations.

Donors and international aid agencies, for their part, should synchronize their monitoring and evaluation requirements in order to reduce the administrative burden on Eritrean officials who are seeking to coordinate nationwide reconstruction efforts.

8. The Eritrean government should promulgate a clearly defined policy toward international aid agencies in order to improve working relationships.

Relations between the Eritrean government and most international aid agencies have been strained throughout Eritrea's post-independence years. Despite the welcomed level of cooperation during the current emergency, aid organizations and Eritrean officials continue to carry a legacy of mutual mistrust.

Eritrean authorities should sign specific agreements with all international agencies that participate in reintegration and reconstruction projects. Official agreements might encourage international agencies to provide multi-year funding and commitments beyond the relief and settlement stages.

A clear and formal articulation of expectations and limits that both sides have of the other will help avoid future disagreements. Without clear guidelines, Eritrean authorities cannot count on donors and aid agencies to sustain their activities indefinitely, especially as emergencies elsewhere command their attention and resources.

C. Balancing Eritrea's Needs

9. International donors should support a broad-based reintegration and reconstruction strategy that is sensitive to the economic, social, and political consequences of Eritrea's re-



cent border war.

Eritreans' strong sense of national unity born of shared suffering and common need is a powerful asset in building Eritrea's nationhood. Donors should ensure that aid strategies strengthen the country's social solidarity rather than weaken it.

This means that donors should support refugee reintegration within a context of broad community-based reconstruction projects that benefit returnees and non-returnees alike. Returning refugees, internally displaced persons, expellees from Ethiopia, demobilized fighters, and hundreds of thousands of other war victims need assistance.

International aid donors should carefully balance assistance to these overlapping impoverished populations to avoid competition for resources and gaps in reintegration. While mindful of the special requirements of each target group (see below), reintegration programs should provide comparable help to all those in need.

A strategy that favors one beneficiary group over others could trigger resentment in a country full of needy people. A reintegration strategy with wide benefits is a useful investment in future stability.

10. Eritrean officials and aid workers should ensure that refugees who spontaneously return to Eritrea outside the structures of the UN-supervised repatriation program become properly registered and fully integrated.

The overwhelming majority of returnees during the 1990s arrived in Eritrea spontaneously because no organized repatriation program existed (with the brief exception of the PROFERI program). It is likely that a number of current refugees in Sudan will choose to repatriate on their own rather than wait up to 18 months for a repatriation convoy, particularly if they determine that reintegration programs are working effectively in Eritrea.

11. The governments of Eritrea and Sudan, in coordination with UNHCR, should more actively involve the refugees and returnees themselves in managing and evaluating the repatriation program.

The refugee population should be involved in the design and management phases of the repatriation

program, as well as in monitoring and evaluating the program as it unfolds.

As a first step, the two governments and UNHCR should facilitate more "scouting" visits to Eritrea by refugee representatives in Sudan, and visits to the camps in Sudan by Eritrean residents. Eritrean visitors to the camps in Sudan should include former returnees and representatives of Eritrean NGOs.

Local Eritrean administrators should incorporate recently returned long-term refugees into the planning and implementation of community reconstruction efforts.

12. International donors should give appropriate attention to the reintegration of Eritreans expelled from Ethiopia.

Nearly all expellees from Ethiopia experienced the trauma of abrupt expulsion, often entailing family separations and the loss of all personal assets. Many expellees need personal counseling.

Most expellees arrived in Eritrea with even fewer resources than refugees returning from Sudan. Yet many expellees possess highly developed skills and supported themselves during their many years in Ethiopia. Many expellees are well-equipped for rapid economic integration in Eritrea if they receive immediate relief, short-term training, access to credit, or assistance in finding employment.

13. International donors and aid workers should address the special needs of Eritreans who were internally displaced during the recent border war.

Massive numbers of Eritreans became internally displaced during the border war—primarily farmers, herders, and small shopkeepers. Despite extensive damage to their homes and communities, displaced Eritreans who return home are often able to resume productive activity with modest short-term assistance consisting of farm tools and livestock.

14. The international community should address the reintegration needs of a quarter-million soldiers.

The World Bank and UNDP, working closely with Eritrean authorities, drafted a plan to ease the



transition for demobilized Eritrean soldiers, including many female former combatants. Programs for demobilized soldiers should be coordinated with reintegration programs for returnees and other sectors of society.

Demobilized soldiers are likely to be less patient with unexplained delays or inadequate services. Such impatience could prove destabilizing unless aid agencies clearly explain assistance programs and adhere to timetables.

15. International donors and aid agencies should provide support to indigenous Eritrean NGOs, which already possess skill, knowledge, and experience.

Donors should support Eritrean NGOs such as the National Union of Eritrean Women and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students. These and other organizations can help teach returnees about independent Eritrea's evolving traditions and values, organize cultural activities that integrate different groups within Eritrean society, and provide counseling to help returnees cope with their transition to a new life.

16. Donors should fully and immediately fund landmine clearance programs.

Tens of thousands of landmines lurk in areas where returning refugees and formerly displaced persons intend to settle. These explosives—laid during the recent border war—will constitute a serious threat to Eritreans' lives for years to come. The international community should fund programs that help find and destroy landmines in Eritrea.

Programs to educate refugees about the dangers of landmines should be readily available to Eritrean refugees before they depart Sudan, and at reception centers after they arrive in Eritrea. Landmine awareness campaigns should be sustained in returnee areas for years to come, until such areas are deemed safe.

D. Sudanese Government Responsibilities

17. The government of Sudan should facilitate

the voluntary repatriation of Eritrean refugees in a timely fashion. Sudanese authorities should cease exploiting the refugee population as a source of political pressure on Eritrea or income for Sudan.

The Sudanese government for many years has inflated refugee numbers to exaggerate the need for refugee aid donations. Sudanese officials have repeatedly stalled repatriation agreements in an effort to maintain relief funding.

Sudanese authorities delayed the repatriation agreement earlier this year while Sudan and UNHCR argued over the level of resources Sudan would receive for transporting and assisting departing refugees. In April 2001, the Sudanese government delayed registration of prospective returnees for unexplained "technical reasons."

These postponements mean that few long-term Eritrean refugees were able to return to Eritrea with full UNHCR support in time for the 2001 crop cycle. Unnecessary delays should cease.

E. Maintaining Peace

18. The governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia should settle all future disagreements peacefully. The international community should remain dedicated to securing the current peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia should work peacefully to settle the border issue permanently. Neither government should manipulate the border adjudication process to score "political points" against its neighbor.

The international community should not appease delays or obfuscations by either side. All border claims should be decided according to established international treaties and international law, as called for in the peace agreement. The international community should hold both countries to this standard once the neutral "boundary commission" produces its report.

The UN peacekeeping force should remain in place until both countries publicly accede to the outcome of the arbitration process.

