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Ethiopia: Current treatment of Ethiopian Jews (Falasha, Beta Israeli); discrimination by state or non-state agents

This response was commissioned by the UNHCR Status Determination and Protection Information Section. Views expressed in the response are not necessarily those of UNHCR.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)*.

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is comprehensively summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD within time constraints only little information could be found on the subject of current treatment or discrimination of Ethiopian Jews by state or non-state agents.

An Israeli social scientist and expert on migratory patterns of Ethiopian Jews contacted by ACCORD, Gadi Ben Ezer, described the size, location, and living conditions of Jews in Ethiopia in an e-mail dated 25 May 2009 as follows:

"Most of the Ethiopian Jews still in Ethiopia are those who are called Fallas Mura. This term is somewhat problematic, however, because it covers a heterogenic (rather than homogenous) population. At any rate, there are around 8,500 of these still there, who are supposed to be checked by Israeli officials for their 'eligibility' according to the law of return. This, however, has become an issue of some disagreement between certain officials, which then leads to a 'dragging feet' technique by the government, with the Supreme Court pushing them every now and then, following appeals by various human rights and specific pro- Ethiopian Jews' organizations. This population is in bad condition, having left their villages, and moved to Addis Ababa and/or Gonder town, living in a 'refugee-like conditions'. Some, certainly, encounter hostile sentiments from their social environment, partly (but not solely) due to their Jewishness. Beside that, there are still other Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, not so many of them. I do not have the exact numbers."
(Ben Ezer, Gadi, 25 May 2009)

The USDOS Country Report on Human Rights Practices published in February 2009 states the following about the Jewish community in the country:

„The Jewish community numbered approximately 2,000, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.“ (USDOS, 25 February 2009, Sec. 5)

Reuters writer Elana Ringler reported in March 2007 that between 8,000 and 16,000 Falashas Mura, Ethiopian Jews who have converted to Christianity, were waiting in a camp in Gondar, where they were living under dire humanitarian conditions, for clearance to emigrate to Israel. In Ethiopia, the Jews were living separated from the rest of the population:

„Thousands of Ethiopians who say their Jewish roots entitle them to live in Israel are stuck in a squalid camp in Ethiopia, their dream of a promised land fading as Israel scrutinizes their family ties. Known as "Falashas Mura," the descendants of Ethiopian Jews have reverted to Judaism since their late 18th and 19th century forbears converted to Christianity, sometimes under duress. [...] That would leave thousands -- estimates range from 8,000 to 16,000 -- in Gondar's sprawling, filthy camp and the surrounding villages. Many people in the camps have been waiting for years in cramped mud shacks with no running water or basic sanitation, depending on food donations to survive. Families have been split up, only some of their number allowed into Israel. [...] The Falashas have been an isolated group ever since they emerged in the region in pre-Christian times. Ancient records showed they were barred from owning land and hardly ever married outside the community. In 1668, the country's then Emperor Yohannes I issued a decree ordering them to live apart from Christians in their own village. In modern times the legal constraints disappeared but the separation persisted. [...] Popular feelings about the group never descended to anti-Semitism, mainly because most Ethiopians outside the Falasha community also claim an ancestral link to Israel.“ (Reuters, 27 March 2007)

Further information about size and location of the Jewish groups in Ethiopia could be found:

According to the undated website of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ), Ethiopia has a current population of 18,000 to 26,000 Falasha Mura:

„In 1997, the Netanyahu administration decided to stop immigration of Falasha Mura after a final group of 4,000 immigrants. Between 18,000 and 26,000 Falasha Mura remain in Ethiopia today.“ (IAEJ, undated)

The South African research facility Institute for Security Studies states in an article published in March 2007 on the diaspora of Ethiopian Jews (also known as Bete Israel or Falasha) and Feres Mora (former Ethiopian Jews who have been forced to convert), that some 100.000 persons of both categories had left Ethiopia since the 1970s, and that the number of remaining Bete Israelites was between a few hundred and a few thousand persons:

„It is believed that Jews have inhabited Ethiopia for more than 2000 years, most likely preceding Christians, the first of whom is known to have existed in the country in the 3rd Century AD. They have lived in outlying village community clusters in the northern highlands, most of them not far from one of Ethiopia's old capitals, Gondar. [...] This

community, unique in sub Saharan Africa, refers to itself as 'Bete Israel', or 'the House of Israel.' The name Falasha, derived from the Amharic word that means migration, is not appreciated by the group. [...] Since the 1970s, Bete Israelites have been migrating to Israel, first in a trickle, and later on in 1985 and 1991 in two major human movements that took more than 60,000 people to the Holy Land. Since 1991, travelling to Israel assumed a more normal and paced character, highlighted only by the pressure from another category of Ethiopians, who claimed that they had been forced to change their religion. The 'Feres Mora', as they are known, have added their numbers to the Jews moving to Israel in the midst of controversy in that country regarding their bona fides. It is believed that the numbers of both categories that have left Ethiopia has reached some 100,000 persons. This would indicate that the Bete Israelites currently in Ethiopia could not be more than a few thousand souls - some say that the figure could be in the hundreds." (ISS, 7 March 2007)

According to the US Department of State's (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report of September 2008, there are small numbers of Jews in the country. The numbers of Falash Mura are decreasing rapidly:

„There are small numbers of Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, animists, and practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. [...] The country has a small Falash Mura community. Falash Mura are being processed for immigration to Israel, and the number remaining is dwindling rapidly. The Israeli Government is expected to finalize immigration of the remaining Falash Mura in 2008. Many additional individuals claiming to be Falash Mura are also seeking immigration to Israel, but many appear to be economic immigrants rather than genuine Falash Mura. The Government is cooperating with the Government of Israel to facilitate emigration of the remaining Falash Mura community." (USDOS, 19 September 2008, Sec. I)

References: (all links accessed 25 May 2009)

- BenEzer, Gadi: E-mail response, 25 May 2009
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