



REFUGEES REFUGIES FLÜCHTLINGE REFUGIADOS

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30,000 Refugees in Djibouti

A recent issue in our series of refugee reports dealt with the situation in Somalia. Neighbouring Djibouti is also a country of asylum for refugees from Ethiopia. This report will outline the background to, and present realities of, yet another refugee emergency to which comparatively little attention has been paid.

Between 1967 and its independence in 1977, Djibouti was known as the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas, names which refer to the two main tribal groups in the country. Before 1967 it was called French Somaliland. Djibouti's terrain is mostly barren and the climate torrid, with scarcely more than 12 cm. (5 in.) of annual rainfall. This small, arid, sparsely populated place is important chiefly because of trade passing to and from Ethiopia through the port of the capital Djiboutiville. However, the economy has been severely crippled by the Somali-Ethiopian conflict and occasional guerilla attacks against the railway. This, coupled with the refugee influx, has resulted in very high unemployment.

Approximately 30,000 Ethiopian refugees have come to Djibouti in recent years. They constitute more than 10% of the country's total population of about 250,000. Djibouti has the geographical misfortune of being located at the meeting point of the conflicts in Eritrea and the Ogaden, so against its own will it has become a haven for refugees from these two wars.

People have been fleeing to Djibouti since 1975, and basically they constitute two groups. There are about 15,000 of rural origin who have fled the Ogaden and now are accommodated at the two camps of Dikhil and Ali-Sabieh. A second group of some 3,200 registered urban refugees, mostly from Eritrea, live in Djiboutiville. The government estimates that an additional 15,000 urban refugees may be there as well, but these have not been registered and accorded refugee status.

To be recognized as a refugee is important in Djibouti, for that entitles one to official assistance in the forms of food, shelter and medical treatment. However, the great majority of those who have taken refuge in the city are not classified as refugees and therefore not entitled to assistance. The situation among these urban refugees, whether registered or not, is described by one experienced worker, who is himself an African refugee, as the worst situation of its kind that he has ever seen. Another observer wrote the following description of living conditions among one group of refugees: "Several hundred Eritreans are living in a camp called Boulaos, by the sea, but next to Djibouti's slaughterhouses. The camp is remarkable for its total lack of trees and its stifling heat, swarms of flies and unbearable stench. Ramschackle huts have been slapped together with old cardboard boxes and gunny sacks. Empty tin cans have been used to catch the latest rainfall*."

* Claire Brisset, The Guardian, May 20, 1979

To its credit, Djibouti, though a reluctant host to the refugees, has been attempting to meet its obligations as a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. It has established a National Eligibility Commission, a National Committee for Assistance to Refugees, and a National Office for Assistance to Refugees, which is UNHCR's implementing partner in Djibouti. In May 1978 the United States contributed US\$3.1 million in food and other aid, and UNHCR has a US\$2.2 million programme which provides food, shelter, transport, medicine, education and resettlement.

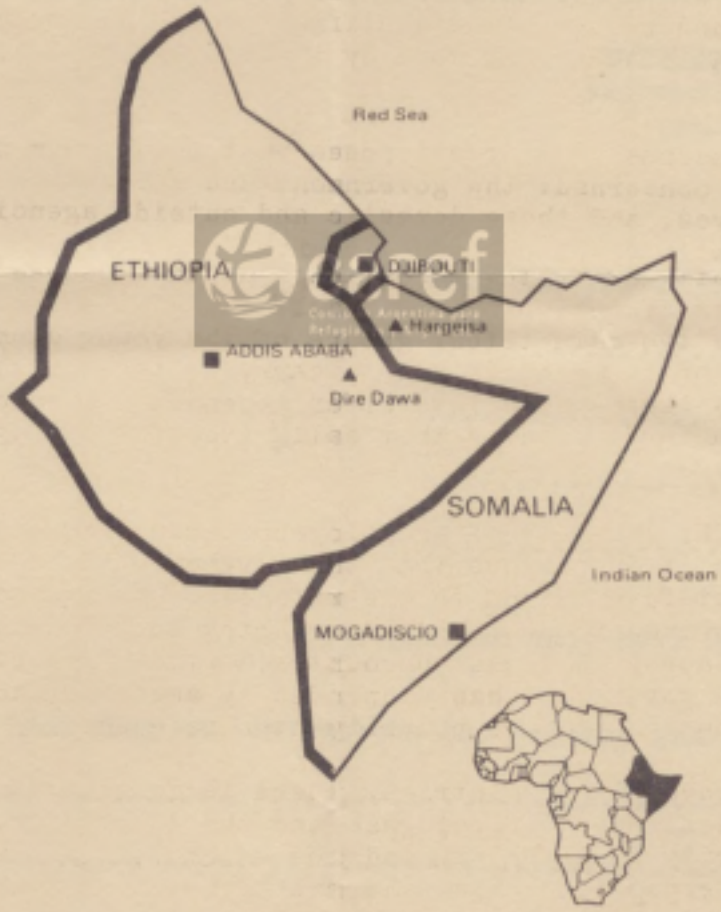
A number of voluntary agencies are at work in Djibouti or have made contributions to refugee assistance there: Département Evangélique Français d'action Apostolique (DEFAP) through the Protestant Social Centre in Djibouti-ville; Médecins sans Frontières, France; Dutch Interchurch Aid; Catholic Relief Services, U.S.A., which operates a food distribution scheme under contract with the American government; Diakonisches Werk, Germany, and World University Service, U.K., which provide scholarship assistance. After a visit by two of its staff members to assess the refugee problem in Djibouti, the World Council of Churches in consultation with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of YMCAs and the World YWCA, decided help could best be given by working with DEFAP, particularly in the matter of staffing. A search is now underway to find qualified people to expand the work for refugees and local needy being done by the Protestant Social Centre in Djibouti-ville.

The refugees' presence in Djibouti poses what seem to be nearly insoluble dilemmas for all concerned: the government and its native population, the refugees themselves, and those domestic and outside agencies wanting to help. Burdened with crushing economic problems, Djibouti has the added political difficulty of trying to define a neutral course between the centrifugal forces of Ethiopian and Somali nationalism, both of which find expression in the two main tribal groups of the young country. Added to this is the load of refugees it has to carry. It is little wonder, therefore, that Djibouti has been forced into utter dependency upon outside aid, no enviable position for a country that calls itself sovereign and wishes to pursue an independent policy.

According to UNHCR, the rate of unemployment among nationals in Djibouti stands at 50%, so it is obvious that the government must be careful not to show the slightest favouritism to the refugees. In its concern for internal security, the government has been endeavouring to relocate the urban refugees to more remote places. This has encountered strong resistance from the refugees, but the government has responded by asserting that the needs and security of its nationals have priority over refugees.

As in so many impoverished countries, there is no important distinction between the physical needs of refugees and the local poor. This is an issue of great sensitivity in Djibouti, and one which does not work to the advantage of the refugees, especially those who are Christian and who speak English as a second language in Moslem, francophone Djibouti. With virtually no chance at all of getting work or of continuing education in Djibouti, the only alternative is to discover ways and means of obtaining resettlement opportunities or scholarships abroad. UNHCR has managed this for a few hundred refugees who have gone to Egypt, Iraq, and some of the Gulf states. These efforts must be greatly intensified, and here the voluntary agencies should be able to contribute significantly.

The dilemmas of the helping organizations, whether domestic or international, can be inferred from all of this. Quite apart from its remoteness and harsh climate, Djibouti is devoid of its own resources, extremely expensive, suffers a severe housing shortage, and, as indicated, has to cope with dangerous social and political tensions exacerbated by the refugee influx. To work in such a setting requires the greatest resourcefulness, sensitivity and patience, not to mention fund-raising capability. There is the added complication of Djibouti's relative insignificance. Compared with Somalia's 1.2 million refugees* and the Sudan's nearly 1 million**, what are Djibouti's 30,000? Herein of course lies one of the challenges that all these dilemmas pose: agencies should be advocates of a regional approach to the problem of refugees from Ethiopia, urging a balanced response wherever they may be found and reminding their constituencies of the special difficulties that a place like Djibouti has. Perhaps the greatest challenge, though, is to find the perseverance for seeing the terrible problems in Djibouti through to a successful and humane conclusion. One knowledgeable person who knows the country and its difficulties well has this to say: "I believe that the situation in Djibouti is not hopeless. There are no hopeless situations: there are only hopeless people."



* A figure which includes 600,000 people officially registered plus another 600,000 who are unregistered.

** According to UNHCR, the number of registered refugees in the Sudan is at 400,000. However, large number of refugees, especially from Eritrea, are unregistered and bring the total close to 1 million.

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Refugee Service, CICARWS
World Council of Churches
150, route de Ferney,
1211 Geneva 20,
Switzerland

1. Correct my address as follows:



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2. Delete my name from your mailing list.

3. Add the following name(s) and address(es) to your mailing list:

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Signed:

Date: