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Somalia: "The Worst Refugee Problem in the World"

The quotation in the title is from Mr. Poul Hartling, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He describes a dramatic increase in the flow of refugees resulting from intensified fighting in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia between Somali insurgents and forces of the Ethiopian government. Although the estimates vary, it is generally agreed that well over a million refugees from the conflict, and also from drought, have come to Somalia. As of mid-March, 614,000 people were living in camps and registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while another 700 to 800,000 existed unregistered among the local population. The daily arrival rate now is said to be 2,500. Acting upon a request by the government of Somalia, the UNHCR has issued an appeal to the international community for contributions in cash and/or in kind for US\$120 million to help the refugees.

The flow of refugees from Ethiopia began in 1977 when Somali forces invaded the Ogaden region in support of ethnic Somali insurgents. They were repulsed by Ethiopian forces assisted by Cuban combat troops, but since then guerrilla warfare in the Ogaden has continued, as has the refugee exodus. The composition of the camp refugees in Somalia suggests that there will be no early end to insurgency in the Ogaden, for 90% of this population is made up of women and children. The men are presumed to have remained behind to fight with the West Somali Liberation Front, which is rumoured to have in its control several sizeable areas of the Ogaden.

Reports vary on why the refugees have fled and exactly what their composition is. From Somalia come accounts of people escaping from war, from villages that have been bombed, flocks strafed, and water-holes bombed or poisoned by the Ethiopians. These refugees and their Somali hosts charge that Ethiopia is deliberately attempting to force out of the Ogaden its ethnic Somali population, either to clear it completely or to resettle the land with people more loyal to the Ethiopian government.

Denying these allegations, the Ethiopians say that people who left the Ogaden in 1977 are coming back. According to a report printed in The Observer on March 2, 1980, and quoting Ethiopian authorities, of the 1,070,000 persons who left the Ogaden in 1977, slightly more than one-half have returned, with the daily arrival rate now averaging 1,000. The Ethiopians add that many of the refugees are in fact nomads who, because of the drought prevailing over the last four years, were impelled to go wherever they could to get food. Thus, say the Ethiopians, the women and children went to Somalia while the men remained behind with their flocks.

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That drought conditions prevail in the Ogaden is indisputable, and it is safe to assume that nomads have augmented the flow of refugees from the war. To what extent is more difficult to say; the actual number of nomads can probably only be determined by a UNHCR survey such as has been conducted recently in Pakistan to establish eligibility for official refugee assistance. It is also a fact that large numbers of people have left Somalia for Ethiopia. The UNHCR cites a figure of 500,000 returnees, which roughly corresponds with Ethiopian claims, but the difference is that the UNHCR total covers a period of at least three years, while the Ethiopians seem to be saying the movement back has been recent and massive and, but for the Somali authorities, would be much larger.

There is, however, no indication that the Somalis are preventing people from leaving their country. In fact, the government has shown a cooperative attitude toward the refugees, who now comprise at least one-fourth the total population of Somalia. For a country whose annual per capita income is estimated to be US\$100, so many refugees could more plausibly be interpreted as an intolerable burden, yet the refugees' presence has not been presented in this way by Somalia.

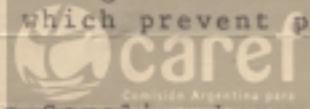
Also, the escalation of the refugee problem to critical proportions in Somalia is of recent origin. At the beginning of 1979, according to UNHCR, only 100,000 refugees were living in camps in Somalia. By the end of the year this number had risen to half a million, with another 700,000 living among the local population. Between January 1 and March 13, 1980, the camp population rose to the aforementioned total of 614,000. These sudden increases coincide with accounts of intensified fighting in the Ogaden which, according to unconfirmed reports, sometimes spills over into Somali territory in the form of air attacks against refugee camps. It is difficult to reconcile this sudden, massive increase of refugees in Somalia with the Ethiopian claim that refugees and nomads are returning now in large numbers and that the Somalis forcibly prevent even more people from coming back. It is doubtless true that the border between Ethiopia and Somalia is one that sees frequent shifts of population, including sizeable nomadic groups making seasonal movements back and forth, but taking even that into account, what besides conditions in the Ogaden area that threaten security and life itself can explain the presence in Somalia today of at least 1.2 million refugees?

Another point is that refugees from Ethiopia should be seen in a regional context. Not only are there at least 1.2 million refugees in Somalia, but Ethiopia's other neighbours have had to absorb large influxes as well. The Sudan harbours up to a million people who have fled from the Eritrean region of Ethiopia, and tiny Djibouti gives reluctant asylum to some 30,000 refugees from both Eritrea and the Ogaden. The resulting total of approximately 2.2 million refugees makes Ethiopia the country from which more people have fled than any other in Africa*. This fact, when applied to the general situation in Ethiopia, contradicts the claim that

*It is also by far the single largest refugee-producing country in the world, exceeding Vietnam with its 1.5 million, and Afghanistan with its nearly 1 million. Purely in the numerical sense, the only comparable refugee situation is that in the Middle East where an estimated 2.3 million people have fled several countries or been displaced within their own.

people are returning to that country. Despite the sizeable return to the Ogaden, this movement is far outweighed by the number who have fled that area as well as other parts of Ethiopia. This in turn points to the necessity for agencies, as they plan their response to the refugee crisis to Somalia, to be mindful of the other countries to which Ethiopians have fled and where they exist in great need. This statement is of course not meant to detract in any way from the desperate situation in Somalia, but rather to encourage an evenhanded, regional approach to the refugee problem throughout the Horn of Africa. Somalia's problems are gradually becoming news, and this is good if it will help attract the world's attention and assistance to that country. It would be unfortunate, however, if in this process the needs of Ethiopian refugees in other lands were to be slighted.

Attention must also be given to solving the problems within Ethiopia that cause the refugees to flee. It is readily acknowledged that in a short perspective this is primarily a political question. But in at least one very important way, and taking a longer perspective, the churches and their related agencies have a unique opportunity to work for peace, reconciliation and development in Ethiopia -- and elsewhere -- and thereby help ameliorate the conditions that force people to become refugees. Through the churches in Ethiopia, the churches in the rest of the world may be able to help transform the battle in that country from one against dissident peoples to one which is directed against hunger, sickness, poverty and ignorance. The churches should advocate the conviction that the fundamental struggle in Ethiopia is not between ideologies of East and West but rather against the host of problems which prevent people there from achieving justice and self-reliance.



To return to the situation in Somalia, here is a summary of refugee conditions and what is being done to help alleviate them.

As already noted, almost all the refugees in camps are women and children, and many of the men there are elderly, ill or handicapped. The UNHCR describes food as a "vitally urgent requirement, particularly in view of an expected general food shortage in Somalia." There is a high incidence of tuberculosis, malaria, dysentery, hepatitis and bronchitis, so health services and medicines are equally necessary. Shelter and clothing are urgently needed to provide some protection for the refugees, and wells must be dug and water purification measures taken to ensure adequate water supply and sanitation. Polluted water and the lack of drinking water are mentioned by UNHCR as major causes of illness. Rains expected in April will make many access roads to the refugee camps virtually impassable, so heavy vehicles and temporary road repair work are needed to ensure regular deliveries of relief supplies to the camps. Storage facilities must be provided for food, water, medicines and the other needed goods.

The UNHCR in cooperation with the government of Somalia is coordinating all assistance to the refugees. Help in limited amounts began to arrive as long ago as early 1978, and since then the volume of assistance has grown as the refugee population of Somalia increased. Following the major arrivals in late 1979, UNHCR issued its US\$120 million appeal, arranged airlifts of blankets, tents and clothing, and committed funds for supplementary food, medicines, clothing, household supplies, dispensaries, educational materials and transport. Extra UNHCR staff and sponsored personnel from governmental and voluntary organizations are working on relief distribution, health services and development of water resources.

All these plans are for the relief of people living in camps, but, as already mentioned, the majority of the refugees in Somalia are living outside the camps. How are these people to be reached, and even if they are, is there any meaningful distinction between them and the local poor? In any case, with the UNHCR concentrating its attention on the camps, a vast amount of work remains to be done by concerned organizations for the rest of the refugees as well as others in need.

Assuming that the refugee situation in Somalia will be a longstanding one, agencies are already beginning to make plans for the stage after the immediate survival needs of the refugees have been met. These plans include the development of agricultural and self-help projects, technical assistance programmes, counselling and community development work. Day care for children will be a high priority, and handicraft and other labour-intensive projects could be organized.

A meeting was recently held in Geneva to discuss the need for all kinds of assistance to the refugees in Somalia, and future weeks and months will no doubt see substantial increases in the amounts of refugee assistance going to that country from official as well as voluntary sources. The following voluntary agencies are already at work in Somalia: the League of Red Cross Societies and the Somali Red Crescent Society; the Catholic Institute for International Relations, U.K.; Federazione Organismi Cristiani di Servizio Internazionale Volontario, Italy; The Mennonite Central Committee, USA; Médecins sans Frontières, France; Oxfam, U.K.; and the Berliner Missionswerk, Germany. Christian Aid, U.K., has sent £50,000 to the UNHCR in support of its efforts in Somalia.

The World Council of Churches is already engaged in sizeable programmes of refugee assistance in the Sudan and about to become involved in Djibouti. It also is a member of an ecumenical consortium which recently was created in Ethiopia to assist the Orthodox Church in that country in its development programme, for which a total of US\$1.6 million is hoped to be raised. Several options seem possible for WCC involvement in Somalia, and these are now being studied. Support with money and perhaps personnel channeled directly through UNHCR is a possibility. So is the establishment of WCC's own field operation. Or, as is the case in many countries, the WCC and its member churches might be able to assist through a Christian agency already operational in Somalia. Each of these options is being closely examined, and the CICARWS network and other interested parties will be informed of the recommended course of action.
