

THE CONDITION OF ERITREAN REFUGEES IN THE SUDAN

By Emnetu Tesfay

The war that is going on in Eritrea, which started over eighteen years back, against the occupation troops of the Ethiopian regime has inflicted untold casualties upon the civilian population. The merciless and indiscriminate measures taken by the occupation troops have caused many Eritreans to be homeless and destitute. Families have become dismembered either as a result of death or escape. Many families have been displaced to areas they do not know after the complete demolition of their villages by the Ethiopian Air Force and artillery. They have no belongings, no shelter and not even clothing except what they had on them as they fled. Worst hit are women, children and the aged, whereas the youth, who are the first targets of the enemy troops have either joined the liberation fronts or fled to Sudan.

As a result of displacement and thus loss of property tens of thousands of people are starving to death. Diseases like TBC, malaria, diarrhea have become rampant. There is lack of medicine and food supply. The only and little help these war victims get is from the liberation fronts, who have to share what they have. Help from humanitarian organizations is therefore very vitally and urgently needed.

In addition to the internal refugees, there are also Eritrean refugees grouped in refugee camps inside Sudan along the border with Eritrea. The condition of these refugees is also the same as that of the ones inside Eritrea despite the fact that they are supposed to be getting help from outside sources via the government of Sudan. Malnutrition is common among all the refugees but it is pronouncedly visible among children and infants. Hunger accompanying diseases are common and their prevalence is accentuated by the lack of inadequate supply of food and medicine. Inadequate water supply and lack of soaps make hygienic conditions very low. There is no chance of any kind of gainful employment nor any kind of education. People have to sit and wait for conditions to improve. As a result of these unbearable conditions many lose patience and out of sheer despair venture on their own to the towns of Kassala and Gedaref for eventual transfer to Khartoum. All this is done in disguise, otherwise the Sudanese police will arrest them and return them to the horrible refugee camps. The main reason for going to Khartoum is to get employment and education and if possible a chance to go anywhere outside Sudan, for a place not tried is a better alternative for these desperate people. When they arrive Khartoum they have no place to stay until they make acquaintances with some Eritreans who came earlier. The main aim of these refugees is to register at the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and acquire a legal status and some help. Not many can make it and those who make it get a negligible sum of money. Thus the only alternative left to them is to look for jobs in exchange for free lodging and food. Mostly the females have a better chance of getting employed as domestic servants with Sudanese families. And they are the ones who help their relatives, friends and acquaintances out of the meager income they get. Since these young Eritrean girls are employed without any contract they can be dismissed any time and they cannot complain to any authority since they have no legal status. In this manner they manage to support themselves and unemployed friends. But until when can they continue like this? It is at this juncture that the question of humanitarian aid that comes into the picture.

It is a sad situation to see a multitude of young people idling in the streets of Khartoum or along the bank of the Nile seated under the shade of trees. They wait day in and day out for something favourable to happen. Of course all wish to travel abroad and prefer mostly to Europe so that they can either work or continue their education. However, since all cannot go to Europe, they can be helped financially to establish themselves in Sudan or other African countries where they can be easily assimilated. In fact, the possibility of accommodating refugees in the fields of gainful employment and education was discussed in the Conference on the situation of Refugees in Africa in Arusha, Tanzania, 7-17 May 1979. In line with this idea it can therefore be arranged a programme of rehabilitating these refugees by the organizations willing to offer their help in collaboration with the governments of the countries willing to give asylum to the said refugees. Moreover, it should be seen to it that careful consideration is given to the cultural background of the individuals or groups to be helped. For example if we observe the situation of Eritreans of Moslem upbringing and the Eritreans of Christian upbringing in the Sudan in particular and in the other Arab countries in general one finds that the former group is much more easily assimilated and accepted because of religious attachment and knowledge of the Arabic language. Whereas the latter group finds it very difficult to get assimilated and accepted because of its religious background and language difficulty. In order to avoid discrimination many Christian Eritreans are forced to change their names to Moslem ones. This case is very common among Eritreans who live in Saudi Arabia. It is because of this phenomenon also that one sees that most Moslem Eritreans residing in many of the Arab countries while the Christian ones tend to seek asylum in West European countries where they shall at least be treated as foreigners or refugees and not as Christians or Moslems.

(This report was presented to the Amnesty International group in Norway in November 1980. The source of all the information is Giorgio Habtesellasié as I have never been in the Sudan.)