

Situation report on Region 2 (Afar National Regional State)

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General

A mission from UNDP-EUE, MSF Switzerland, and the Afar Relief Association (ARA) visited the north-eastern sector (Zone 1 and part of Zone 2) of the Afar National Regional State (Region 2) from 5-23 December 1995. The mission met with members of the administration, traditional elders, and various members of civil society according to the following itinerary:

05/12	Arrive 'Aysa'ita (interim regional capital) ¹
06/12	'Aysa'ita
07/12	'Aysa'ita / Data Bahari / Manda
08/12	Manda / Buxe
09/12	Manda / 'Eeli Da'ar / 'Aysa'ita
10-12/12	'Aysa'ita
13/12	'Aysa'ita / Dubti / Logiya
14/12	Logiya / Sardo / Giyyac ("Giyah") / Afxeera ("Afdheera")
15-16/12	Afxeera
17/12	Cayyu ("Hayyu" or Dicchiotto) / Buxe
18/12	Buxe / Andabba
19/12	'Eeli Da'ar
20-22/12	Imino (villages of Dama'aataf, 'Adayto, Koreenah, Isiyo, Adafa)
23/12	'Aysa'ita
24/12	Return to Addis Ababa

Many thanks are due to the numerous officers of the Region 2 administration who offered advice and support for this mission, and especially to the Afar Relief Association whose guidance and experience among the nomads has been invaluable.

Introduction

At best, the Afar National Regional State (Region 2) is poignant testimony to the emptiness of past commitments, by both governments and aid agencies, to the development of Ethiopia. At worst, the region's historical neglect and relative underdevelopment implies a legacy of imperial exploitation and exclusion from whatever progress other parts of the country have enjoyed. The vast majority of the Afar population, perhaps 80% or more of whom are nomads, have seen virtually no improvement in living standards for decades, if not centuries. Health services, education, water development, where present, are all woefully inadequate; in most of the region, they do not exist at all. Only the manufactured goods now available to the Afar nomads through trade (like ubiquitous plastic sandals, cigarettes, and galvanised cooking pots) distinguish the present from the past.

“Development,” when it has taken place, has usually taken the form of assimilation by the central Ethiopian state and partial annexation to Ethiopia’s highland economy - a process perceived by many Afar to represent economic and cultural imperialism rather than “progress.” Development schemes in the Afar region have historically reflected the priorities of central government or select commercial and political interests, while the needs and aspirations of the Afar people have been chiefly disregarded. The plantation projects of the Awash valley and the construction of the main Addis Ababa - Asab highways through Awash and Bati have been of less direct benefit to Afar natives of the region than to migrant workers from the Ethiopian highlands. Indeed, the plantations reflect in no small way the archaic philosophy that nomad populations must be “sedentarised” for their own good. The roads have evolved into a micro-economy dominated by highlanders and alien commercial interests: most of the commerce - bars and hotels - associated with the transport sector, are owned and managed by members of other ethnic groups. Prostitution and alcohol flourish. Services, from room and board to schooling and health care, are often available only in Amharic or not at all, and primarily benefit migrant workers rather than the indigenous Afar. And even these modest signs of “development” rarely survive more than few hundred metres from the main Addis - Asab highway and the sprawling Awash valley plantations.

Undoubtedly, some Afar have benefited from these developments. Destitute nomads, having lost their herds in past droughts, may have found new livelihoods working as wage labourers on irrigated cotton farms, or by participating in the truck-stop economy of the towns along the main road (although the assertion that impoverished Afars are better off serving as wage labourers on plantations or other commercial enterprises rather than resuming a nomadic lifestyle with restocked herds would be hard to substantiate). Others, a diminutive minority, have earned secondary school diplomas or university degrees and have found employment with government or in the private sector. But if the prime indices of human development are applied to the region - human health and life expectancy, under-5 and maternal mortality, the status of women, access to essential services like clean water, health care, vaccination, and education,² then the majority of the Afar have been totally unaffected by these changes. All of these services remain at a derisively rudimentary level, and rarely exist beyond the concentrations of highland populations. New “development” programmes like the building of the road from Sardo to Afdhera, intended to “open up” a previously inaccessible area, will probably only mean more of the same.

This conspicuous historical failure might also be interpreted as a blessing in disguise. Had the inappropriate and destructive development policies of the past been any more effective, then the damage to Afar society might have been as extensive and irreversible as it has been among the Somalis and other unfortunate casualties of international aid and centralised development. Instead the Afar region’s relatively sheltered past, together with Ethiopia’s recent devolution of authority to regional governments, offers the Afar people and their new administration a tremendous opportunity: the direction and means for their future development are theirs to choose, unburdened by historical precedent and without having to repair the damage of past failures: everything remains to be done; little needs to be undone.

Whether or not the Afar people seize this moment to define their future in terms of their own priorities, needs and aspirations, or shackle themselves instead to alien and outmoded concepts of “development” is a matter for Afars alone to choose. But it is also the responsibility of their partners in the central government and the donor community to encourage the Afars to set their own agenda, not to set the agenda for them. Such an approach will require, energy, creativity, and discipline. The experience of other marginal groups shows that the easiest solution - the path of least resistance - is all too often an act of surrender to tired, alien development strategies of little relevance or benefit to the people they are supposedly meant to help.

Overview of the Afar Region

Like the Somalis, the Maasai, and various other pastoral groups of the Horn, the Afars have been historically divided between discrete colonial states: Djibouti, Ethiopia and, at different times, Eritrea. But even within Ethiopia itself, the Afar population was parcelled out between administrative regions dominated by other ethnic groups, straddling the regions of Tigray, Welo, and Western Hararghe. In none of these provinces, nor in the neighbouring countries, were Afar given proportional representation in government, breeding a legacy of exploitation and neglect that persists to the present day.

The Afar people, a Cushitic, predominantly nomadic race who share linguistic and cultural ties with the Somali, Beja and Saho people, inhabit some of the most arid, hostile territory of the Horn of Africa (see map). Only the Awash valley and the forested highlands of northern Djibouti offer respite from an otherwise rocky and desertic terrain. Out of necessity, the Afar have thus evolved a highly adapted mode of transhumant pastoralism, probably the most efficient (and perhaps only) sustainable form of land use in such a barren environment. In times of drought, the fertile pastures of the Awash provide some security as an alternate source of water and grazing; the coastal Afar have also adopted maritime skills and, unlike many other nomadic groups, include fish in their diet.

Afar traditional leadership has historically been located in eight sultanates, the three most significant being those of Tadjourah (the most senior), Rahayta, and Awssa (the fiefdom of Ethiopian Sultan Ali Mirrah, which includes the regional capital of 'Aysa'ita). In addition to their leadership role, the Sultanates also serve as repositories of Afar culture and customary law - elements that pervade in Afar society and regulate many aspects of social interaction. In recent years, however, interaction with external political and economic systems has begun to erode the integrity of the Sultanates, together with the pre-eminence of customary law and traditional values in Afar life. Indeed, one of the most aggravated political conflicts affecting the present administration of the Afar National Regional State is in large part a consequence of the erosion of the monarchical system.

Security, Governance and Administration

Compared with some other parts of Ethiopia, the Afar region is relatively secure: acts of banditry are isolated, and travel in most areas is free from security constraints. On principal routes, travel after dark is possible. Politically, however, the situation cannot be described as stable: the past few months have seen sporadic outbreaks of political violence, and an overt struggle for power in the regional administration that has effectively paralysed government. Some parts of the region, particularly the north-western zone (Zone 2), are reported by the regional administration to be disturbed and possibly unsafe for travel.

Ethiopia's recent national elections brought the Afar People's Democratic Organisation (APDO or "ADE"), an EPRDF ally, to power in Region 2, but the party has yet to establish a stable administration. Canferey ("Hanfrey") 'Ali Mirrah, a key member of the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) and son of the Awssa Sultan, was appointed regional President, ostensibly in an effort to appease the outgoing ALF. The subsequent contest between the ALF and the APDO, exacerbated by the fact that the seat of the regional administration ('Aysa'ita) lies within the traditional territory of the Sultanate, has effectively paralysed administration in the region ever since. Hanfrey left the region for Addis Ababa immediately after the elections, returning to 'Aysa'ita only in late December. During his absence, on 7/8 November, fighting in the regional capital 'Aysa'ita reportedly left over a dozen dead and wounded when, allegedly at the instigation of the APDO administration, government troops launched an attack on Canferey's residence and clashed with ALF supporters. During the last week of December, Canferey returned to 'Aysa'ita, attempting a sweeping reshuffle of Bureau chiefs, most of whom were APDO appointees. Although his new appointments have apparently been ignored and may never take effect, the general agitation has yet to subside, and it seems unlikely that this prolonged period of political upheaval is over.

In the north-west zone of the Afar region (Zone 2), reports of two armed groups known as “Ugugumo” and “ARDOF” (Afar Revolutionary Democratic Front?), generate a picture of persistent insecurity and instability. Even the regional government is uncertain whether travel in the area is safe, but reports from adjacent zones and travellers from the area suggest an unsettled and occasionally violent scenario. The activities of “Ugugumo” (meaning “revolution”) are apparently not new to the area, dating from Dallol zone’s inclusion in eastern Tigray and consequent tensions between the Tigrayans and segments of the local Afar population. The group reportedly harbours a strong anti-EPRDF orientation and has recently been involved in direct clashes with Ethiopian government forces in the Dallol area. Travellers from the area in ‘Aysa’ita and Afxeera report serious clashes in recent months; caravan trade routes through the Dallol area seem to be frozen and there are reports of food shortages.

ARDOF, if it really exists as a cohesive political and military force, is said to pursue the unification of a “greater” Afar territory - a policy which puts the group on a collision course with both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments and finds little endorsement from more moderate Afar groups. Allegedly the offspring of a former administrator of Asab under the Derg, ARDOF has failed to attract a following of any consequence, but may hope to piggyback the growing popularity of “Ugugumo” which operates in roughly the same area.

While neither of these armed groups seems to enjoy broad support, Ugugumo may have the sympathy of - and even some links with - other formal Afar political organisations. Although political parties might not condone Ugugumo’s violent methods, other opponents of the APDO (*like the ANLF, which currently holds second place in the regional parliament with 12 seats*) are said to empathise with the group’s vehement opposition to the ruling APDO (Ugugumo fighters have reportedly targeted the homes and property of APDO members in the Dallol area as “traitors”). Furthermore, a recent central government decree demanding that all illegal weapons be surrendered to the administration may be directed primarily at resistance groups like Ugugumo, but has already provoked widespread indignation: many Afar men and boys carry weapons (usually Kalashnikovs), partly in self-defence and partly as powerful heritage symbols. Government attempts at disarmament are unlikely to be any more successful than earlier efforts in the Somali region, and may even radicalise broad segments of the Afar population - something that resistance groups could only be grateful for.

Another key player on the Afar political scene remains the Djiboutian rebel movement, *Le Front Pour la Restauration de l’Unité et de la Démocratie (FRUD)*. For the most part the Front, many of whose members are still refugees in Ethiopia, has remained uninvolved in the politics of Region 2 and is absorbed with troubles of its own. For over a year the movement has been in some disarray following military setbacks in Djibouti, a grave split within its leadership (several key members signed a peace accord and defected to the Djibouti government), and a crackdown by the Ethiopian government that forced some of the leadership into exile while others were briefly detained. Circumstances have thus forced the FRUD into a state of relative dormancy, but its identity and the commitment of much of its membership remains intact. Future developments in Djibouti, and current tensions between members of the FRUD and returnee supporters of the ALF (many of whom have spent long years as refugees in Djibouti, are francophone, and hold President Hassan Gouled’s government in considerable esteem) may yet draw the FRUD back into a more active political role, both in Djibouti and in Ethiopia.

In sum, the region’s security and administrative problems are indicative of a fractured political landscape. Although divisions partially reflect clan and regional differences, there is a general sense that the “‘Aysa’ita government,” whoever controls it, is unaware of and unresponsive to the needs of the Afar people at large. The inhabitants of rural areas visited by the mission seemed entirely alienated from formal administrative structures, and totally unimpressed by the government claims to legitimacy through democratic election. In many

places the government has virtually no presence or authority, and is patently unwelcome (the word “dawlaat” seems to be used only in a derogatory sense). The stability of the Afar region and its administration would thus appear to be at present somewhat frail, and its future still uncertain.

Social Services

The Afar Region’s infrastructure in terms of basic social services is gravely inadequate; much of what exists dates from the time of Haile Selassie. Although there are some plans for modest improvements in the near future, bringing the region in line with other parts of Ethiopia will take substantial time and effort. Vaccination coverage languishes at 2% (together with the Somali Region, the lowest in Ethiopia). Not one major medical referral centre exists in the entire region. Only two secondary schools exist and no education, primary or secondary, is available in the Afar language. Water development has been meagre: with the exception of ‘Eeli Da’ar, all settlements on the main road between Logiya and the Eritrean border must tanker in water from either Logiya or Asab. Rural water development has been anaemic: most communities still fetch water by donkey or camel from (often unclean) sources several hours away. Veterinary services are virtually non-existent, even though four out of five Afars subsist almost exclusively upon animal husbandry. If poverty may be defined in terms of human development, rather than a simple calculation of income vs. purchasing power, then the Afar Region exists in nearly absolute poverty. The region will require special attention if it is not become increasingly marginalised and fall even further behind Ethiopia’s other regions.

Human Health:

The Afar National Regional State is without a medical referral system, without rudimentary primary health care, and without a functional EPI programme. The consequences hardly need elaboration, but the absence of reliable health statistics makes it impossible to quantify the dimensions of the problem. Only the government health clinics along the main highway report monthly data to the Regional Health Bureau, but these reports reflect the profile of a primarily “urban,” highlander clientele (not rural Afar nomads) and are anyway of dubious diagnostic validity; most of the health workers are health assistants, not trained nurses, and typically have not had refresher training in over a decade. In addition to the common diseases targeted by vaccination, incidence of malaria and tuberculosis appear to be high. Only one tuberculosis treatment centre, at Dubti, is available for the entire region and drug supplies there are insufficient. In the Awash valley, schistosomiasis is also reported by the Regional Health Bureau to be an acute problem for which no treatment is locally available: patients are given a prescription and referred to Addis Ababa.

Maternal and child health in rural areas are especially poor. One NGO, Afar Relief Association, estimates that “under-5” mortality may run as high as 35%. Random interviews conducted during the mission would suggest that in some places it is even higher: several women encountered by the mission reported that more than half of their children had died. Maternal mortality is also elevated. Endemic anaemia and eclampsia appear to be common causes of death during childbirth. Haemorrhage associated with traditional “circumcision” and infibulation techniques is also reported to be common and potentially lethal. With the exception of several obviously “wealthy” communities where meat formed a regular part of the diet, rural women and children were routinely observed by the mission to be anaemic, a condition exacerbated in some areas by endemic malaria.

Tuberculosis poses an acute problem to the Afar. Observations of the mission, re-inforced by discussions with the Regional Health Bureau and Afar Relief Association, suggest that tuberculosis is a problem of nearly epidemic proportions. Over 1,600 cases are reported by the Regional Health Bureau the ‘Aysa’ita area alone. Only one treatment centre exists, at Dubi, and medicines are in short supply. The course of treatment available is a long (12+ month) regime, poorly suited to nomadic Afars. A need clearly exists for a well-adapted T.B.

programme of broader scope. However, prevailing medical orthodoxy concerning tuberculosis effectively precludes the establishment of a treatment programme within highly mobile communities, since they risk a high default rate and burgeoning resistance to medication. On the other hand, unless some attempt is made to design approaches for treatment of T.B. among nomads like the Afar, then the failure of the medical system to address this important source of morbidity and mortality will be complete.

Two hospitals exist in the region. The “National Hospital” in Zone 3 (near Awash) was not visited, but is not described by the Regional Health Bureau as a functional referral centre. Dubti hospital, which offers the most advanced medical care in the region, stops short of surgery (only a few minor surgical procedures under local anaesthetic are performed). Serious medical/surgical cases thus have a choice, if they can travel, of Dessie, Asab, or Djibouti. Since most rural communities are at several days walk from first line medical care (i.e. health posts), even common emergencies (a woman requiring caesarean section) can be mortal. *Medecins du Monde* is considering a programme of support to Dubti hospital in order to upgrade surgical facilities.

No active health workers were encountered in any of the rural areas visited, except the voluntary health assistants of the Afar Relief Association who work mainly in the north-east sector of Zone 1 (plans exist to expand their programme). Fixed health posts exist in most major towns along the main road, but quality of care is poor and even basic hygiene is not universally observed (for example, in several centres situated on the Addis-Asab road, a high-risk axis for the transmission of HIV, some health assistants were observed to re-use needles and syringes due to inadequate supplies). At this level, only minor complaints may be treated. More advanced care may be found at ‘Aysa’ita and Chifra (health centres), and Dubti (hospital). The French NGO *Medecins du Monde* is planning to support the regional health bureau with training of Afar health workers, provision of supplies and equipment, in the main health posts along the road from Logiya to Buxe, a programme that will no doubt upgrade the standard of health care and access to Afar patients, but can be expected to have little impact beyond the communities of the main road. The Regional Health Bureau, with UNICEF’s support, is planning to construct and furnish 12 new clinics this year throughout the region, but even a cursory examination of services already offered by clinics in the region raises doubts about their capacity for diagnosis and treatment and their real impact on morbidity and mortality. While the need for more health centres is definitely real, other, more cost effective, channels for the dispensation of health services like health education and community health workers could be simultaneously explored.

One alternative being actively explored - enthusiastically - is the private sector. In the Afar region, medical entrepreneurs typically adopt the title “Rural Drug Vendor” - a convenient cognomen that requires the bearer to have no particular expertise, license or supervision. Although the better “Vendors” no doubt take their vocation seriously, others are driven more by the profit motive than by any innate Hippocratic impulse - an inclination that leads to unhelpful and even dangerous “medical” practices. Vendors might prescribe several drugs at once as a kind of “cocktail” for ills they are incapable of diagnosing, or submit to a client’s insistence that a drug be a certain colour (red is popular) regardless of its function. Unregulated drug vending may therefore do more harm than good but, in principle, privatisation of parts of the health sector could represent a viable option. Training, licensing and regulation of pharmacies would help to weed out the good from the bad, and might prove cheaper to the state in the long run than operating public clinics of only marginally greater capacity. But until they are subjected to a more rigorous form of control, most Rural Drug Vendors represent a disease rather than a cure.

Food Security and Nutrition:

It should be noted that many of the problems observed during the mission, particularly anaemia among women and children, were in one way or another related to diet. Afar nomads

consume primarily milk and local bread (“ga’ambo”), but - relatively speaking - little meat. The nutritional content of such a diet, supplemented by coffee and tea, is poor. Problems like malaria may exacerbate anaemia, while other diseases (i.e. T.B.) are frequently opportunistic and thrive among malnourished populations. A core issue, therefore, would appear to be neither lack of food, nor the absence of purchasing power, but rather a matter of health education. Various commodities (lentils, for example) are usually locally available but are simply not desired or consumed by nomads. Educating and encouraging rural communities to diversify their diet to include more locally available iron- and protein rich foods may be among the first steps towards combating poor health.

In certain areas, the possibility may also exist for communities to partake in limited cultivation, both diversifying their diet and ameliorating food security. So far, agricultural development in the Afar region has been dedicated to large scale cotton farming, an endeavour that has done little or nothing to improve the lot of Afar people, but more recent work involving small-scale oasis agriculture may offer a more productive and culturally relevant alternative to the plantation model of sedentarization and large-scale irrigation. Some pioneering studies (at Gewane, Afambo, and Berhale), led by Denis Gerard, have already demonstrated the potential of date palms as a local source of income and food security in time of drought. Carefully managed, date palm plantations can also create improved conditions for small scale cultivation of legumes, cereals and fruits, offering greater variety of diet. Further study and development of the technique is required, but preliminary results suggest a potential in oasis agriculture that more “sophisticated” forms of irrigation agriculture have failed to realise, and in a manner complementary to the Afars’ pastoral economy and culture.

Animal health:

Veterinary services are even more restricted than human health care, but no less vital for the well-being of the pastoral population. Officials from the Regional Agricultural Bureau, which is responsible for animal husbandry, complain that they lack the capacity either to conduct field work, or to develop a long-term development plan in their sector. Among their problems are a lack of transport and trained veterinary staff needed to deliver adequate veterinary services in rural areas. Although the capacity of the Bureau is certainly an issue, initial improvements in veterinary care need neither be complex, nor expensive. Much of the Afar region is inaccessible to vehicles anyway, so the added value of a fleet of LandCruisers would be limited. Veterinary scouts operating on foot would probably enjoy greater access and better acceptance among nomadic communities, and could be selected from among the communities themselves. During the most recent dromedary epidemic, clan elders also indicated their readiness to send their own delegates pick up medicine wherever it could be made available (i.e. along the main road).

In the meantime, pastoral Afar employ traditional vaccination techniques whose efficacy is unclear and probably deserves further study. Nomads encountered by the mission asserted that their methods (i.e. smearing the nostrils of healthy animals with the urine of an infected animal, and medicines made from local vegetation) can be effective against common diseases, but that unfamiliar infections can be devastating. A 1995 epidemic among camels ravaged the entire region west of the main Addis-Asab roadway, impoverishing thousands of families before intervention by the central Ministry of Agriculture finally helped to stop the outbreak.

In responding to the needs of the pastoralists, the administration could also apply the experiences of pastoralist-oriented programmes throughout the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. Such programmes offer examples to the Bureau both in terms of capacity-building, and in formulation of a sectoral development plan. UN agencies could be instrumental in facilitating communication and technical co-operation across borders in support of the IGADD member states collective desire to breathe new life into the organisation.

Education:

Despite Ethiopia's new Constitution, no education in the Afar language yet exists, and the majority of the rural population has no local access to education in any language. In the principal settlements where schools do exist (along the main road), courses are conducted entirely in Amharic and many (perhaps most) school-children are the offspring of migrant workers. Even these schools tend to be over-subscribed, under-equipped and under-staffed. Most schools visited lacked furniture, blackboards, and water for drinking or washing (latrines). Only two secondary schools exist in the entire region.

One solution offered by education officials envisions boarding schools, one of which is apparently already under construction in 'Aysa'ita. But better infrastructure is only one - and perhaps the simplest - step towards the educational development of the region. The curriculum must also be adapted to meet local needs: education in the Afar language, and courses relevant to Afar society would be one such improvement. Extending primary education to nomadic communities will also be essential in raising basic literacy and numeracy skills among rural children of both sexes (Afar families are more likely to send boys away to study than girls). The timing of semesters and the location of schools could be modified to better reflect the migratory cycles of nomadic families; and pastoral students may well be better off attending schools - even boarding schools - in a rural setting instead of spending months at a time in the alien, relatively unsanitary environment of 'Aysa'ita (and other "urban" centres) where *qaad*, alcohol and other distractions proliferate. If attention is not given to such details, there is a danger that students may become estranged from both their families and their society by their educational experience, and thus be less competent to contribute in the long term to the advancement of the Afar people.

Water development:

Along the main road from Logiya to Buxé, there is no water source except for 'Eeli Da'ar, and water must be tankered in at considerable expense from either Logiya or Asab (in Buxé, for example, water sells at Ethiopian Birr 800 per tanker). In rural areas the situation is even worse: water development beyond the Awash valley seems to have been almost totally neglected. Although in some places this reflects the depth of the water table and the futility of digging or drilling for water, alternative strategies like rainwater catchment, earth dams, etc. do not seem to have been seriously explored.

Indeed, rural water development in this most arid of Ethiopia's regions would seem to be a priority neither of central, nor of regional government. Not one drilling rig has been made available to the Afar region, although several are reportedly available in neighbouring Tigray. At the regional level, UNICEF is still seeking justification for significant funding previously allocated to the Water Bureau, of which virtually nothing has been reported on.

The development strategy of the regional water bureau may be even murkier than its financial position: a recent policy statement by the chief of the Regional Water Bureau, cited in the Ethiopian Herald newspaper (07/12/95), asserted that the regional water development strategy was aimed at helping nomadic pastoralists change their mode of life and lead a sedentary existence. Such thinking would seem to contradict the growing body of evidence that "sedentarisation" programmes have been almost universally unsuccessful and frequently damaging, partly because local ecosystems cannot tolerate non-pastoral methods of land- and water-use over the long term and partly because they require a traumatic socio-cultural transformation of the target communities (it would also seem unlikely that a majority of Afar nomads would seek sedentarisation if consulted on the issue). Like health, education and agriculture, water development should probably promote the refinement and evolution of pastoralist techniques, rather than eradication of this efficient and highly developed way of life.

Refugees

About 18,000 Afar refugees from Djibouti are estimated by UNHCR to remain on Ethiopian territory, while several thousand more are reported to have settled in Eritrea. Most are scattered along the main road from 'Aysa'ita to Buxe, either integrated into local settlements, or - in the case of nomads - free to graze in the areas of their host clans.

Assistance to the refugees has taken the form of an unorthodox and controversial programme intended by UNHCR to better accommodate the socio-economic character of the refugees and to avoid dependency patterns. Establishment of camps has been studiously avoided and refugees are neither officially registered, nor furnished with ration cards. Ration distribution is conducted through refugee community leaders; education has been organised by the refugees themselves (in some places better than others) without the involvement of the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) or UNHCR. Water is shared with the host communities and a minimal supply of drugs is provided through extant government clinics (unlike local residents, refugees are not required to pay for their medication).

This innovative system has both its advantages and disadvantages. Though it may be better adapted to the nomadic character of rural Afars (if somewhat difficult for urbanites from Djibouti-ville), it is operationally more difficult to monitor and control. Accusations of corruption and malfeasance are rife, although complaints are directed as often at the refugee representatives and local community leadership as at the executing agency, ARRA. In several locations refugee representatives approached the mission with a variety of complaints: dysfunction in the ration system was said to have forced some groups to abandon the refugee system and to seek support from their clans both in Ethiopia and in Djibouti, but serious nutritional problems were not reported; in Manda, local police officers and members of the town council complained that widespread corruption in the food aid system was creating tension and occasional violence within the community. Several elders requested the assistance of UNHCR in setting up a more representative supervisory body, and expressed desire that UNHCR officials visit the field more regularly in order to monitor progress.

Refugee educators, supported in part by the French Embassy in Addis Ababa, accuse the ARRA office in 'Aysa'ita of having held back its 1995 teaching budget for 8 months (the programme has run for approximately 3 years without any assistance from UNHCR or ARRA), before trying to assume control of the curriculum in September. Teaching staff apparently refused the proffered assistance in order to maintain their autonomy. This high calibre programme continues to function independently of UNHCR and ARRA, despite shortages of pedagogic materiel and other obvious constraints.

Another common refugee grievance is the lack of "official" recognition accorded by the Ethiopian government and UNHCR - a reaction to UNHCR's decision not to formally register individual refugees. Not a few refugees encountered felt that they had been deprived of certain rights under international law - an as yet unproven charge that may merit further consideration. On the other hand, refugee registration would probably deprive UNHCR of its flexibility in dealing with the refugees, perhaps even necessitating the establishment of refugee camps, while opening a Pandora's box of registration hazards. A disproportionate number of local residents would probably try to register for refugee assistance - something that the mobile nature of Afar society and the significant francophone population in the border areas would render nearly impossible to prevent.

Although the programme seems to be meeting the basic humanitarian needs of the refugee community, certain aspects of its management may be creating local problems, and might require some corrective action from UNHCR. UNHCR might consider, at the request of the refugees and their host communities, closer supervision of the programme for a limited period, in order to mitigate some these problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The marginal territories of the Horn of Africa tend to be places of chronic conflict and instability, and although their populations suffer most from its consequences, the states in which conflict occurs are also affected. Scarce resources that could be better invested elsewhere are consumed by violence and the latent potential of the land and its people goes untapped. The Afar people, having endured several major conflicts over the past two decades (on several different sides) - are an exemplary case. Apart from having successfully resisted attempts by other groups to impose their will on the Afar, they have little to show for their tribulations.

The visions of "development" expounded by others have been neither beneficial nor attractive to the Afar, but the Afar themselves have equally failed to produce an alternative. Today, as Ethiopia's Afar population is consolidated for the first time within a single province with autonomous powers of self-government, change that benefits the majority of the Afars is far from assured. Ethiopia's new policy of ethnic federalism opens an unprecedented opportunity to the Afar people to leave behind the chronic instability, economic stagnation, and neglect that have characterised the region's past. Failure to seize this opportunity will certainly mean only more of the same, together with the increasing marginalisation and irrelevance of the Afar people at the national and international level. Such conditions are a laboratory for conflict.

Despite Ethiopia's first major electoral process, the majority of the Afar population still seems to feel deeply alienated from their own regional government - a sentiment that is likely to persist for some time. People in rural areas will be, at least in the short term, unaffected by both the current political transition and the "development" opportunities it promises. Many may even resent what they perceive to be a pattern of continuing preferential treatment for the administration - whoever dominates it. In the long-term, political stability and effective administration will require the participation of people in government, and conversely, the responsiveness and accountability of government to the people. The sheer inaccessibility of the Afar territory and its population means that government - even an Afar government - faces a real challenge in assuring their representation in the decision-making progress. Creative approaches to Afar pastoral society and economy are needed, but creativity will also mean risk-taking.

After several years of gross mis-mangement under previous administrations, the new regional government seems prepared to undertake such a challenge. Already, considerable emphasis seems to have been placed on "Afarization" of social services, although this has yet to be articulated in a clear policy orientation and is not uniformly reflected throughout the various Bureaux. Another critical problem yet to be overcome is what the government describes as lack of "capacity:" the dearth of trained, educated Afars, and the lack of resources for them to function at their full potential. Such basics as stationery and typewriters are in short supply, and more expensive equipment such as radios and vehicles are in high demand.

While "capacity building" undoubtedly constitutes a real need for the region, the policy context and orientations in the service of which this "capacity" is supposed to be put to use remain vague. Some bureaux personnel complained to the mission that even the skills needed to formulate coherent sectoral development plans are not available. In the absence of a clear, realistic development strategy, bureaucratic inertia may supersede development priorities by default; institutional complacency, drift towards centralisation and under-representation of the region's pastoralist majority would become real risks.

Support to capacity building within the regional administration might be appropriate not only at the institutional level, where UNICEF and UNDP have already begun to commit resources, but also in the domain of policy formulation. An overall orientation for the regional government has been partially formulated by the Department of Planning, led by Dr. Abdalla Abdu, with whom the mission met briefly. Encounters with other bureaux, however,

suggested that no single orientation yet pervades the administration. “Technical co-operation” between regions (within Ethiopia) and countries of the sub-region, catalysed or facilitated by agencies of the UN system, could be one way to address this policy deficit.

One key area of potential co-operation concerns the study and promotion of pastoral modes of life, and the reconciliation of nomadism with the needs of a modern administration. State paradigms in the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, have tended to marginalise pastoralists and attempt to either assimilate them into - or exclude them entirely from - the state apparatus. The plight of the Afar people today is striking testimony to such policies. The regional government might then benefit from greater exposure to and exchange with programmes concerned with other pastoral groups throughout the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. An orientation towards the pastoral society and economy would be more constructive than outmoded plans for sedentarization of nomadic communities.

Some progress has already been made in this regard: health care among pastoral communities is already a field of endeavour for several non-governmental organisations. HealthNet has recently begun a programme north of Awash (Zone 3) although it is too early to extrapolate results from their work. The Afar Relief Association (ARA), already working in the field for several years with a bare minimum of logistical support (i.e. no vehicles, no radios) have made extraordinary progress in bringing health education and essential health care to nomadic communities in Zone 1. Afar Aid, a small British charity, has made similar headway among communities along the main road. Such pioneering programmes should be encouraged by the administration and its partners, and continually evaluated; they offer clues to a viable model for delivering such services on a regional basis, and an alternative to alien, less adapted methodologies. Support to local pioneers in the field, together with analysis of other innovative programmes throughout the Horn could help save the administration costly waste through trial and error, while filling - on a temporary basis - the “gaps” in administrative capacity that the government is seeking to eliminate.

A possible strategy for engagement in the region might therefore take the form of a dual approach, building the capacity of the administration, while offering simultaneous operational support both to established social services, and through exploratory programmes like those described above. Subsequent periodic development plans could then incorporate more successful, field-tested techniques (in human and animal health, education, water development etc.) within the remit of the more highly developed administrative structure. Pursuit of these two simultaneous objectives would bring immediate benefits to the broader Afar community (primarily nomads), while defusing political and clan-based prejudices that may have evolved over the past few years through a more equitable distribution of resources, services, and influence.

Finally, when the administration’s global development strategy begins to come into focus, international concerns will also require scrutiny. Linkages between countries with Afar populations will deserve special consideration: many socio-cultural issues and development challenges are shared, while their collective political health is also, on many levels, interdependent. Together with the Somali people, the Afars have perhaps the greatest stake in IGADD’s articulated desire for closer co-operation and co-ordination on regional issues from food security to infrastructure, and even conflict resolution. UN agencies in several countries of the Horn, in response to IGADD’s express desire for reform, have already informally articulated priority issue areas “of common concern” that involve trans-national groups: developing a framework for greater co-operation on shared problems, and solutions, would be a major first step in addressing the needs of the Afar, the Somalis, and others groups like them who may have slipped through the geopolitical cracks in the topography of the Horn.

¹ *Note on Afar Language and Orthography*: Although, unlike Somali, an “official” Afar orthography does not exist, a usable and widely accepted standard has been developed using the Latin alphabet with several important changes. This alphabet is almost entirely phonetic, although tonal accents must be learned.

q	close to the Arabic <i>ayn</i> (Somali “c”) - a voiced pharyngeal fricative
x	like a “d” with the tongue curled behind the upper teeth ridge (Somali “dh”) - a voiced, post-alveolar retroflex / plosive
c	an aspirated “h” (Somali “x”) - a voiceless pharyngeal fricative

Readers interested in a further differences and characteristics of Afar language should refer to Hayward, R.J. and Parker, E.M. *An Afar-English-French Dictionary*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1985

Since few readers will be accustomed to Afar script, the “q” is transliterated herein as an apostrophe (i.e Qeeli Daqar = ‘Eeli Da’ar). Certain other names are shown in anglicised form beside their Afar spellings (e.g. Cayyu - “Hayyu”)

² Although not usually included among these indices, animal health and access to veterinary services are essential to the well being of pastoralists like the Afar.