

UN Inter-Agency Fact-Finding Mission to Afar and South Welo on Ethiopian Nationals Returning from Eritrea

16 – 19 October 1998

Report prepared by Yves Guinand, Field Officer, UNDP-EUE

Introduction

Led by the UNDP-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia, this inter-agency mission was organised to obtain further information on efforts being made by government authorities and others to assist Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea as a result of the current dispute between the two countries. Throughout this report, the term “returnees” is used synonymously with the phrase “Ethiopian Nationals returning from Eritrea” and should not be confused with the use of the word in the context of recognised refugees returning home from a country of asylum.

Objective

The major objective of the mission was to observe the processing of Ethiopian Nationals returning from Eritrea in selected locations in Afar and Amhara Region. The UN team observed transport facilities, registration handling, medical care, food and water availability and relief and rehabilitation packages intended to be accorded to those Ethiopian nationals having returned from Eritrea. Therefore, the UN team visited the locations of Mille, Logiya and Dubti in Afar Region and Dessie in Amhara Region. In Mille and Logiya the Federal DPPC (Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission) in collaboration with local authorities and international NGOs (Médecins Du Monde and Médecins Sans Frontières-France) has installed one transit camp in each of the two locations.

Methodology

The UN team was composed of representatives from UNICEF, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the UN World Food Programme (WFP), and the UNDP-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia which led the field mission and took the lead in preparing this final report. Individual observations on the ground at the various sites visited were discussed among the UN team members and interpreted with the help of information gathered through informal interviews and meetings with government officials and representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations operating in the areas visited. Additionally, the mission interviewed Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea directly in the camps in Mille, Logiya and Dessie to obtain their impressions, views and opinions on the processing and treatment by the assisting organisations.

Results of mission - Observations on the ground

The first arrivals of Ethiopian Nationals returning from Eritrea in June 1998

Since the first arrivals at the beginning of June, the situation in Afar concerning the handling and processing of Ethiopian National returning from Eritrea has considerably improved, especially in September following the arrival of central DPPC representatives.

The two international NGOs operating in the area (Zone 1), Médecins Du Monde (MDM) and Médecins Sans Frontières-France (MSF-F), have been actively providing assistance since the very beginning of the influx. Nonetheless, during the first two months of the conflict an unconfirmed number of people returning from Eritrea may have dispersed in Ethiopia without having received any assistance. MDM were the first to start operations in collaboration with the Afar Regional Government and the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS). People were sheltered in schools at Logiya and Mille, since these were empty for the holidays. The regional government and MDM supplied transport from the border to the camps and also organised transport to some further destinations out of Afar. This service was stopped when the Federal DPPC took over at the beginning of September. MDM also distributed blankets, soaps, water, and plastic Jerry cans, as well as biscuits and Faffa for children as a food supplement. Sick and needy people returning from Eritrea were treated in the two newly established clinics in Logiya and Mille. MDM supplied also emergency kits adequate for 10,000 people. MSF-France provided similar assistance for Logiya as MDM did in Mille. The French NGO installed a water tank at the bore hole station so that water became available all day long and not only during the few hours electricity is provided to pump the water out of the bore hole.

Most activities, with the exception of MDM's health assistance programme, have ceased for those people returning from Eritrea since the Federal DPPC assumed the lead role in assistance and processing. MSF-France and MDM are now assisting and collaborating with the DPPC concerning the activities performed for people returning from Eritrea.

Mille and Logiya

At the time of the mission's arrival in Mille the transit camp was empty. MDM confirmed the departure of the last camp residents from Mille several days earlier, i.e. on 11 October 1998. Also the 'SOGEA' compound in Logiya, where people returning from Eritrea are received upon their arrival in Ethiopia, was empty as of 16 October, except for some 150 internally displaced Afar people who have been using the facilities since June 1998.

Transit camp administration and registration

Since the beginning of September, the camps in Mille and Logiya have been administered by Federal DPPC representatives. The regional government is not involved anymore in the issue of people returning from Eritrea. The DPPC in Addis Ababa is also in charge of registration and transport facilities to and from the camps in Mille and Logiya.

The registration of people returning from Eritrea is done jointly with ARRA (Administration of Refugees and Returnees Affairs). DPPC camp representatives in Mille and Logiya told the mission the following procedure has been adopted and proved to be effective for registration: to avoid local and other people being registered or people from Eritrea who previously arrived and have already been registered to benefit from transport, food and other allowances, the Federal DPPC representatives join busses coming from the Bure border loaded with people returning from Eritrea, and before their arrival in the camps at Logiya and Mille, distribute identification cards to each bus passenger. These cards must be presented

and handed over for registration. People are grouped and registered according to their preferred destination. Destinations to be chosen from are Nazereth, Dessie, Mekele, and Addis Ababa. People are then organised into groups according to these locations for which further transport is organised.

The registration lists for the various destinations also include additional information on age and sex of registered family heads and members and the family size. Copies of these lists are transferred to DPPC offices in Addis Ababa and to the various places of final destination.

The Federal DPPC representative in Mille told the mission that since his assignment on 13 September, four groups of returnees had been received (on 21 September, 6, 14 and 16 October 1998) adding up to a total of 2,363 people. The mission was able to observe the latest arrival of 463 people on 16 October still in Mille camp. An MSF-France official told the UN team that since the end of June around 5,000 people had arrived from Eritrea and transited through Logiya. Of those, approximately 2,500 were assisted by central DPPC with food and transport.

Length of stay in transit camps

The average duration of stay in both transit camps depends on mainly two major factors:

1. the availability of transport, and
2. the number of free places for accommodation at the next destination, e.g. Nazereth, Addis Ababa, Dessie, Mekele etc.

Nevertheless, people had never stayed more than two weeks, either in Mille nor in Logiya. On average, people only wait a matter of a few days until transport is made available. If, for one reason or another, transport is not available, people are given the amount of money necessary to travel by themselves to their destination, central DPPC representatives told the UN team.

Camp infrastructure and assistance

Camp infrastructure consists of four Rubb Halls (temporary warehouses) in Mille and five Rubb Halls in Logiya. These had been set-up by the Federal DPPC at the beginning of September. Camp capacity is 1,500 to 2,000 for Mille and 3,000 to 4,000 in Logiya. The latter camp in Logiya also consists of several additional houses and rooms, part of which are presently used to accommodate 150 displaced Afar people. Both camps have water storage facilities which are supplied daily by tanker which gets water from nearby bore holes. MSF-France has installed 20 shallow latrines in Logiya camp where showers are also presently available. In Mille, latrines and showers are missing but for the time being sanitation seems adequate and fits the actual requirements in both camps.

Assistance for people arriving from Eritrea has improved greatly with the two relief teams from the DPPC taking care of the camp administration and the processing of people returning from Eritrea. A medical team from the Ministry of Health in collaboration with MDM in Mille and MSF-France for Logiya assists those people who need medical care. MSF-France provides supplementary food for all malnourished children that are less than 80% weight-for-length. Faffa porridge and one cup of tea are given twice a day until the time of departure from the camp. This food is reported to provide a total of 1,200 kilo calories of energy.

In addition, there is a new clinic in both locations of Mille and Logiya, built by MDM, while MSF-France is actively supporting the hospital in Dubti, around 20 km from Logiya. Drugs are provided by central DPPC (which received them from 'Christian Aid'), MDM and MSF-France. Furthermore, ICRC, besides providing safe border passage for the returnees, is also present with a Toyota Land Cruiser converted into a mobile medical clinic for emergency assistance at Bure on the border. ICRC helps to make a quick health screening so that people who need medical treatment can be grouped in a special bus and, if needed, sent directly to Dubti hospital or to the clinics in Mille and Logiya for further treatment.

MSF-France's country representative, present at the Dubti hospital at the time of the UN team's visit, evaluated the food situation for people returning from Eritrea as still being "problematic". Most of the time only biscuits are provided. This was also confirmed by people interviewed in Mille who arrived 16 October from Eritrea. On the way from the border at Bure to Mille, the new arrivals were given biscuits. In the morning they were again given biscuits and a cup of tea. For lunch, local restaurants provided *Ingera* and *Shiro Wot* (sauce). But there was not enough for everybody. For Ethiopian returning from Eritrea who took busses the next day (Saturday, 17 October) to Kombolcha and Dessie, one carton of biscuits was provided per bus and journey.

At the time of the mission's visit, the federal DPPC's planned feeding centre for the Mille and Logiya camps was not yet in place. Federal DPPC camp representatives explained to the UN team that, ideally, each camp resident, either at Mille or Logiya, is provided with three meals a day consisting of tea, water, *Ingera* and additional ingredients such as *Shiro Wot*. The food would be prepared by contracted local restaurants and hotels, but some problems seem to persist. It has to be kept in mind that the area is rather dry and poor and there is hardly enough food for the local population and the hundreds of truck drivers passing by each day and who are having their meals in those local restaurants and hotels. This food problem may be one of the reasons why federal DPPC authorities are trying to process the returnees from Eritrea as quickly as possible so that they do not stay longer than necessary.

Separated families

Some people interviewed by the UN team in Mille transit camp expressed concern about families being separated in Eritrea. Apparently authorities in Assab register people wishing to leave the country, but they do not take special measures to keep families together. Therefore, it happens that families are separated in Assab with only some members arriving in Ethiopia. Understandably, these people do not want to be processed quickly to other parts of Ethiopia, preferring to wait for the arrival of their missing family members either in Logiya or Mille. Another reason why separated family members insist on waiting at the transit camp in Mille is the suspicion that the initial registration lists are being sent to Addis Ababa as well as to the next transit destination with no copy kept in the transit camp itself. Therefore, family members will not be able to trace their members who arrived previously. Federal DPPC representatives assured the UN team that they are keeping copies of all registration lists also at Mille and Logiya.

Dubti - MSF-France supported hospital

Dubti village is situated about 20 kilometers from Logiya on the Awash river and is built at the centre of the "Tendaho Cotton Plantation" state farm. A government hospital is available at the site of the state farm. MSF-France is based in the compound of this hospital to provide back-up technical services to the local community as well as to Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea and the displaced in Afar Region.

The UN mission met with the MSF-France medical team headed by Dr. Milton Tectonidis and Dr. Wubshet Alemayehu. Two MSF-France health workers are allocated to the Logiya transit camp for medical screening while special services are provided for the sick and the severely malnourished at Dubti hospital. The Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS) ambulance provides transport services during times of patient referral. Drugs are reported to be satisfactory for the current health support system.

MSF-France is planning to establish an intensive feeding programme for severely malnourished children and a blanket feeding programme for moderately and mildly malnourished children. The latter will get an extra meal with an additional 400 to 500 kilocalories over and above the ration given by DPPC.

MSF-France is also planning to help upgrade the hospital at Dubti to make it a surgical referral centre for war victims (e.g. soldiers wounded in action). The hospital currently has a 100-bed capacity.

MSF-France has a proposal to locate the worst medical cases arriving at the Bure border crossing closer to Dubti hospital where they would have better access and be able to give them adequate treatment. This would mean that the medical screening of the arriving people has to be done right after the border crossing in Bure. This proposition is unlikely to be implemented because the Ethiopian army does not like to have people too close to their camps in Bure.

Dessie

Of the 463 people who arrived 16 October in Mille transit camp, 320 were already proceeding to their subsequent destinations the next day (17 October). Available destinations were Kombolcha, Dessie and Mekele. 145 opted for Kombolcha, 175 for Dessie. Nazereth and Addis Ababa were not available for the moment. Thus, those who opted for these latter destinations would wait in Mille until there was space in the reception centres and transport available.

Communication and organisational problems

By the time the UN team visited the so-called "Hottie Ground" near Dessie stadium on Sunday 18 October, the buses with people from the Mille transit camp had already arrived. The Zonal DPPD (Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department) in Dessie received one Rubb Hall tent from central DPPC which has been put up recently. Before the arrival of the Rubb Hall, Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea were sheltered in 11 different Kebele halls. The Rubb Hall has a capacity to shelter 350 people. DPPD is actually also installing electricity and water for the "Hottie Ground" camp.

DPPD authorities in Dessie faced some problems upon the arrival of the returnees. DPPD expected their arrival on Monday 19 October and were therefore unprepared. Furthermore, not only people destined for Dessie, but also those destined for Kombolcha and Mekele were brought to Dessie. The UN team was told that the Kombolcha town administration had not been informed beforehand of the arrival of the returnees from Eritrea and were therefore unable to receive them. Furthermore, people destined to Mekele faced onward transport problems and were consequently also stranded in Dessie. The new arrivals complained to the UN team that during their bus journey they only ate biscuits and since their arrival in Dessie, neither food nor water had been provided. The UN team assumed that the food bottleneck was of temporary nature due to the early arrival of the buses. Normally there should be no food shortages in Dessie. Anyway, usually once each group of arrivals have been registered they get biscuits and cash allowances of 20 Birr per person for 5 days.

Registration and provision of ID-cards

As of the mission's visit, 6,373 persons coming from Eritrea had transited through and been registered in Dessie. On average, Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea stay for 4 days before they are dispatched to their next destination. The Zonal DPPD issues an ID-card upon registration and verification of authenticity. The ID-card includes the beneficiary's name, i.e. name of the family head, the number of family members and the type of assistance the family is entitled to. Those who have decided to stay in South Welo Zone, i.e. Dessie, receive their relief-and-rehabilitation-package in Dessie. Those who travel to other destinations, e.g. Mekele, or other zones e.g. North Welo, receive the package at their final place of settlement. In the meantime, they get a allowance of 25 Birr to travel to their respective settlement areas. The transport allowance is provided by the federal DPPC office in Addis Ababa and channelled through the Amhara regional government in Bahir Dar.

The relief-and-rehabilitation-package

The relief-and-rehabilitation-package includes a one-time rehabilitation and reintegration allowance of 1,000 Birr per family head, plus 500 Birr for the spouse and 100 Birr for each child. The package also includes 15 kgs of Sorghum flour, 600 grams of cooking oil per person and supplementary food like Faffa for children under five years of age. These food rations are intended to be distributed each month for a period of nine months. In addition, cooking utensils, plastic Jerry cans, and blankets are given for each family.

The relief-and-rehabilitation-package is provided to the DPPD from the Federal DPPC through the DPPB of the Amhara Region. In Dessie, delays in money transfer from the Federal DPPC to the Zonal DPPD hamper the prompt hand-over to the beneficiaries and thus the effectiveness of the processing system. Furthermore, DPPD representatives complained about the shortage of relief items for distribution.

The "Screening Committee" in Dessie

As mentioned earlier in this report, in May and June it is thought that several thousands of Ethiopians may have returned from Eritrea and dispersed without having received assistance. There is a high probability that quite a number of those persons and families became stranded in Dessie. One reason to believe so is the fact that many of the daily labourers and their families who used to earn a living in Assab emigrated decades ago from North and South Welo. Without anywhere else to go, apparently they headed back to their places of origin. The Dessie town administration and DPPD are facing a situation wherein many unregistered people are now requesting government assistance. The issue became of such importance that the Zonal Government decided to form a "Screening Committee" composed of representatives of a variety of institutions and government departments, i.e. DPPD, Culture, Tourism and Information Department, Department of Labour and Social Affairs, Trade and Industry Department, Dessie Town Administration and a few persons who used to live in Assab. Unregistered people, who arrived earlier this year, have to present a valid Eritrean ID-card or an ID-card from the Ethiopian Community association in Assab, confirming their status and situation.

Choice of places for re-integration

The issue of free choice of settlement and re-integration areas promised to Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea remains unclear and ambiguous to the UN team. A number of concerned people in various locations told the UN team that the Ethiopian authorities, e.g. Federal DPPC representatives in Mille and Logiya, as well as in other transit locations, register and dispatch people arriving from Eritrea strictly according to their places of origin. Therefore, it seems unlikely that a family originating from Amhara Region, for example, are given the option of travelling directly to any destination other than that of their stated place of origin.

Additional issues and points of concern

Contingency planning in Afar Region

A relief committee has been created for the Afar Region, especially for Zone 1 and 2. This relief committee is composed of Federal DPPC, Ministry of Health, Kebele, Woreda and Regional Government as well as MDM and MSF-France representatives. The committee meets according to necessity and more often when numbers of arrivals from Eritrea are high and transit camps in Mille and Logiya full.

The relief committee had yet to discuss contingency planning issues for Afar Region. The opinion of MSF-France's representative was that the situation in Afar compared to the situation of displaced populations in Tigray is rather different. In Tigray, the population density is much higher than in the Afar border areas and so are the number of displaced, e.g. around 180,000 for Tigray compared to around 25,000 in Afar. The Afar Relief Association (ARA) numbers displaced populations around Manda and Bure locations at 20,000. MDM and CARE International did a joint mission to the area, but could not trace or locate any internally displaced Afar. A problem seems to prevail when talking about and defining nomadic populations as displaced since they are not settled, but constantly moving around according to grazing and water availability for their livestock. Since the border conflict erupted in May, nomadic Afars are partly being constrained from moving or using their traditional routes, grazing areas and water points which include across the border in Eritrea. Tracing and locating displaced populations in Afar remains an unsolved issue.

ICRC to evaluate health situation and fill gaps in Afar Region

ICRC is currently evaluating the health situation in Afar Zone 1 to see if there are gaps which may have to be filled. At the time of the UN mission, an ICRC delegate was meeting with all important organisations and authorities to discuss the health situation in the area.

Furthermore, ICRC is trying to find a more convenient solution and an alternative to the screening of arrivals right in the military area close to the Bure border crossing. The army has expressed the wish to clear as quick as possible those Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea away from the border area.

Educational and professional background of Ethiopian nationals returning from Eritrea

The socio-economic background of Ethiopians returning from Eritrea seems to be similar to the bulk of people who arrived in 1991 following the end of the civil war. Most new arrivals from Eritrea are situated within the lower socio-economic strata. Their educational level

rarely exceeds elementary school. Their professional background and work experience ranges from unskilled urban daily labourers, housemaids, construction workers, small scale manufacturers to petty traders. Many children do not seem to have any school education. Most of the recent arrivals are from Assab, where they have been living for more than twenty years. The majority earned a living as daily workers at the port where, since the conflict started, activities have come almost to a halt. Hence, most harbour workers have not been able to earn any income and are subsequently facing considerable hardship. Farming is not a familiar occupation for the majority of those Ethiopians returning from Eritrea whom the UN team encountered during its mission.

Conclusions

Despite communication and timing problems encountered in Dessie regarding the onward transport of dispersal Ethiopians returning from Eritrea, the UN team concluded that, over all, the processing of the returnees is efficiently and professionally organised. Especially in Afar Region, people are processed quickly and efficiently. People are only expected to stay a minimum time in Mille and Logiya transit camps.

All the transit camps visited (Mille, Logiya and Dessie) have adequate health and sanitation facilities for receiving and handling people for at least a period of two weeks. The UN team concluded that the health situation is well addressed both for the area itself, i.e. Afar Region, Zone 1, and for the people returning from Eritrea who need urgent medical treatment following their arrival.

Food availability is a bottleneck in Logiya and Mille since the area is very poor and generally lacking in even basic services. The provision of food from local food stalls does not seem to be appropriate other than as a stop-gap measure for the time being, however, no other alternative seems to be available.

The effectiveness of processing people in the transit camps at Mille and Logiya greatly depends on the availability of transport and the availability of vacant places at subsequent transit centres in places such as Nazereth, Dessie and Mekele.

Matters of concern seem to remain much more in subsequent transit locations such as Dessie, where authorities are facing a number of logistical, organisational, administrative and financial problems. Dessie is currently not able to receive more than 350 people at one time. And other locations, such as Kombolcha, where people are sent and supposed to be received, are not yet prepared or able to receive the returnees. The administration faces difficulties in registering people, but this problem has been identified and the necessary steps are being taken to improve the process. Since the Federal Government is mainly assisting the Ethiopian returnees with money, besides daily food rations in some transit camps, they are running into financial problems concerning assistance. These financial problems are being addressed by the National Fund Raising Committee, chaired by the DPPC Commissioner, which is asking for further public donations of money (as of the end of October, total funds raised were approximately Birr 88 million). As of the date of preparing this report, the Federal Government had spent around 36 Million Birr to assist around 25,000 Ethiopian nationals who returned from Eritrea. Certainly more money will be needed to assist further arrivals from Eritrea.

Another matter of concern is the separation of families during their return from Eritrea. Those having been separated fear not being able to trace their family members once in Ethiopia due to a certain lack of confidence in the registration process in the two Afar transit camps,

where allegedly no copies of registration lists were being kept. Later arrivals were encountering difficulties in making inquiries upon the whereabouts of their family members.

Concerning the issue of choosing the place of settlement, it is still not clear who chooses the final area of re-integration: is it the Federal Government by sending people to their places of origin or can the returnees themselves make this decision?

In Afar Region no contingency planning for a possible increase in humanitarian needs has been drafted so far. Representatives of various governmental institutions and international organisations working in Afar do not feel there is an urgent necessity to do so, as Afar has a low population density of mainly nomadic people who are constantly on the move and are expected to be able to adapt to present and forthcoming situations.

DISCLAIMER

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever of the UN concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

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Annex

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Itinerary

Addis Ababa - Nazareth - Awash - Gewane - Mille - Loqiya - Mille (16 October), Mille - Loqiya - Mille - Dessie (17 October), Dessie (18 October), Dessie - Debre Birhan - Addis Ababa (19 October)

Distances and time table

Addis - Nazereth	90 km	1h 30'
Nazereth - Awash	110 km	1h 30'
Awash - Gewane	152 km	2h 40'
Gewane - Mille	163 km	1h 50'
Mille - Loqiya	50 km	40'
Loqiya - Dubti	17 km	20'
Mille - Bati	100 km	1h 30'
Bati - Kombolcha	40 km	40'
Kombolcha - Dessie	20 km	30'
Dessie - Addis	400 km	7h to 8h

NGOs and other organisations operating in Afar Region

Afar Relief Association - Assaita
Afar Regional Health Bureau - Assaita
Medecins Du Monde (MDM) - Mille
Médecins Sans Frontières France - Dubti
Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) - Camps in Mille and Loqiya
Afar Relief Association (ARA) - Addis Ababa
Afar Aid (small British charity organisation)
Inter Government Authority for Development (IGAD)
ICRC for Ethiopian returnees accompanied through the border areas - Addis Ababa

Persons/Organisations met

Addis Ababa:

Persons met	Organisation	Contact
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Mille:

Persons met	Organisation	Contact
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Dr. Adisu Yilma	MDM, Mille, Medical Coordinator	
Mr. Melaku Michael	MDM, Mille, Administrator	

Logiya:

Persons met	Organisation	Contact
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Dubti:

Persons met	Organisation	Contact
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Dr. Wubshet Alemayehu	Dubti Hospital	

Dessie:

Persons met	Organisation	Contact
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Mr. Hassen Adem	DPPD, Dessie, Logistics and Transport	
Mr. Hussein Reta	DPPD, Dessie, Operations Officer	

Abbreviations

ARA	Afar Relief Association
ARRA	Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs
CARE	Co-operative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
DPPB	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (mostly at Regional level)
DPPC	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (Federal)
DPPD	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department (Zonal)
ERCS	Ethiopian Red Cross Society
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MDM	Médecins Du Monde (French NGO)
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières (International NGO)
NGO	Non-Governmental-Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR
UNICEF
WFP

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
United Nations Children Fund
World Food Programme

Literature list of referred publications and previous UNDP-EUE Afar mission reports

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- Bryden M (1996) Concept Paper: Outline of a proposed Strategy for UNICEF Engagement in Ethiopia's Afar Region, United Nations, Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (UNDP-EUE), February, Addis Ababa, 7 pages
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