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THE REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES FROM TIGRE

by

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THE REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES FROM TIGRE

October 1984 saw the beginning of a major exodus of refugees from Tigre in northern Ethiopia. During the course of the year approximately 200,000 people went to eastern Sudan in search of food, water, and medical assistance. This was a spontaneous move resulting from the devastating effects of five consecutive years of drought and famine and the Ethiopian government's policy of denying food aid to the famine victims of northern Ethiopia who live in areas outside their control.

Eighty-five per cent of Tigre is administered by the Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The Relief Society of Tigre (REST), an indigenous humanitarian organization, is the only operational agency in these areas, and it was they who co-ordinated and organized the move, ensuring that the people had food, water, medical supplies, and shelter during their long trek to Sudan. REST has also been providing emergency food aid and rehabilitation assistance to those affected inside Tigre - an estimated 3,800,000 in 1985 - and was responsible for organizing the repatriation of approximately 57,000 refugees in March and April of 1985. REST is now preparing for the return of over 100,000 of the refugees who came to the Sudan during 1985. UNHCR's mandate only allows it to work with governments and it cannot therefore become involved with repatriation to non-government-held areas. Thus the organizing of the refugees' return to Tigre, fundraising for the programme, and providing the refugees with food and protection on their journey home is totally REST's responsibility. REST is also responsible for supplying returnees with emergency rations and rehabilitation assistance until they can provide for themselves. The lives of up to 120,000 people now staying in Sudan and up to 2,000,000 people living inside Tigre and suffering the effects of famine are dependent on REST.

**Background to the exodus**

Since 1980 Tigre has been suffering from the effects of consecutive years of drought and famine. At the beginning of 1984, 2,000,000 people were in need of

emergency aid. During 1984 the harvest again failed, not only throughout the traditionally drought-prone areas but also in the west - the flattest and most fertile area which had been providing some surplus to the rest of Tigre during the previous years of drought. 3,800,000 people became affected by famine. Of these 3,000,000 were estimated to be in severe need - that is, they had produced no food, had no means with which to purchase food, and had lost the means of production. The total population of Tigre is between 4.5 and 5 million: in other words, seventy-five per cent of Tigre's population was struck by famine during 1985.

Although REST is the only agency operating in Tigre, many non-government organizations work in the area through REST. All aid has to come via Sudan and be trucked into Tigre because the Ethiopian government consistently refuses to allow the passage of food or any other aid into the areas outside its control. The government has ignored pleas from the UN, the Brandt Commission, church organizations, voluntary agencies, and a number of governments, and has not take up the TPLF's proposal for a safe passage agreement.

For the last eight years REST has been organizing a relief programme inside Tigre. The magnitude of the 1984 famine demanded a huge increase in assistance from the international community and a similarly large increase in REST's work and capacity to cope with large numbers of starving people. Although the international community knew that a famine on this scale was developing in northern Ethiopia, the amount of assistance they gave REST during 1984 and 1985 fell far short of what was needed in Tigre. It followed that REST's capacity to respond to those in need was reduced by this lack of financial assistance, shortage of transport, and lack of manpower and administrative personnel.

There are two ways in which food can be got to those in need in Tigre - both are expensive, and both require transport and substantial organization. Food can be trucked in from Sudan, having previously been sent to Port Sudan by donors, or it can be purchased inside Tigre and adjacent provinces in Ethiopia. By late

1984 REST was only able to meet a tiny proportion of the need inside Tigre.

Owing to this serious lack of food and the fact that the situation showed little signs of rapid improvement, in 1984-5 the TPLF and REST adopted a policy of encouraging people to go anywhere they could to find food - to government-held towns in Tigre, to other liberated areas to the south and south-west of Tigre where there was some surplus available, or to Sudan. At first people began to move towards the government-held towns. However, because they did not hold identity cards and thus obviously came from areas outside the government's control, they were denied food aid. In due course pressure from the international community forced the government to give food to these people. However, the government now began to use food aid as a coercive weapon to encourage the movement of people to government areas from where they were taken for 'resettlement' or conscripted into the army. Numerous individual reports, REST and TPLF statements, and independent accounts describe how people were taken by force from government towns and their homelands to areas in the south and south-west of Ethiopia. Increasingly, fear of being given no food, fear of resettlement, and fear of conscription, deterred people from going to government-held towns and swelled the number of those who had no alternative but to take refuge in Sudan.

#### **Organization of the exodus**

The organization of this exodus was a great challenge for REST and the TPLF. Recognizing that if it was not orderly and if facilities and provisions were not organized there would be a high death rate, REST and the TPLF began by registering all people who wished to move to Sudan. A route was then planned and transit centres were set up along this route at intervals of two to three days' walk. These centres were to provide food, water, medical assistance, and shelter. Food and water rations sufficient for the walk between the transit centres was also provided. The people were organized so that they moved with others from their village in groups of 2,000 upwards. Medical personnel walked with them,

caring for the sick. Those too sick to continue the walk were taken care of in the transit centres until they were able to continue their journey by foot, and REST was able to provide a minimum amount of transport for those too ill to walk.

Most movement had to take place at night for fear of air attack by the Dergue. During the day people hid in the transit centres, valleys, or other specially arranged places not visible from the air. The TPLF were responsible for ensuring that the route ahead was safe. They also walked with the people, helping to organize and protect them. There was a constant threat of military attacks by the Dergue in an attempt to prevent people going to Sudan. By forcing them to go to government-held towns for assistance, the Ethiopian government could continue its policy of taking people from these towns for 'resettlement'. They also wished to avoid the bad publicity such an obvious show of need would produce.

Between October 1984 and September 1985 more than 200,000 Tigreans went to Sudan. The exodus was greatest during the first three months, creating enormous logistical and supply problems for REST and the TPLF. It was impossible, at times, to provide enough food and medical supplies, and this caused great hardship. There was also an outbreak of measles which created many problems, particularly amongst the children.

This movement of Tigrean refugees to the Sudan had been forecast up to two to three years beforehand. The magnitude of the drought was known and REST had given ample warning to the agencies that refugees were on their way. Despite this, the refugees arrived in Sudan to find that nothing had been arranged for them. They were placed in a camp called Touklebab: there was a serious shortage of food, water, and medical assistance and there was no shelter. The temperatures were high but they had no alternative but to sit out under the sun. For reasons which are not clear it took UNHCR several months to co-ordinate any assistance, and meanwhile the death rate in this camp was extraordinarily high.

Now, over a year later (December 1985) there are approximately 125,000 refugees living in the four reception centres set up for Tigreans who have come

to Sudan since October 1984. From the beginning REST has played an active role - liaising between the agencies, the refugees, and the Sudanese office of the Commissioner for Refugees, and providing educational and medical services. Until August/September 1985 the death rate continued to be very high in some camps: this was due to an epidemic of acute gastroenteritis, among other things. However, conditions have since improved and the death rate is now much lower.

#### Repatriation programme: 1985-6

For all the refugees and for REST the focus has always been on returning home. Exile in Sudan was a temporary expedient, enabling people to remain alive during the severe crisis in Tigre. The intention has always been to go back as soon as possible. This follows normal migratory patterns when people move to areas of surplus in times of need and then return home to plant in the hope that the following year their land will support them.

Since the end of 1984 REST's fundraising has been aimed not only at helping refugees to move to Sudan and live in the camps, but also at repatriating those who wish to leave. This aid includes the rehabilitation assistance seen as essential in order to recover the means of production lost over the years: seeds that have been eaten; tools that have been damaged, broken, or sold in order to get money for food; and oxen that have either been sold or have died of starvation.

The early rains in Tigre in February/March 1985 were very good. Hearing about this, many refugees decided to return so that they would be able to resume cultivation and begin to support themselves again. REST planned to help 50,000 refugee families to return, giving them emergency relief assistance and rehabilitation supplies. However, there were two serious impediments. The first was the launching in March of a major offensive by the Addis government against the people of Tigre. This lasted for two months and was timed to cause the greatest disruption to people already seriously weakened by famine at a time when they would traditionally be starting to plant and cultivate. The second factor

was the shortfall of funds for the programme - by March 1985 only six per cent of the budget had been covered. Extremely careful consideration had to be given to a programme that would add to the numbers in need inside Tigre.

As the return of some refugees was considered vitally important if self-sufficiency was to become a reality, REST decided to restrict its programme to heads of families or those able to work the lands. The idea was that as soon as the harvest was ready the rest of the family would return. Given an average family size of five, this reduced aid by seventy-five per cent, while not affecting the potential for rehabilitation of the land and the eventual self-sufficiency of the families.

Those refugees who were due to return were concerned about being separated from their families, particularly at a time when the death rate in the camps was quite high. Many feared that they were leaving their families to die. However, after extensive discussions with REST personnel, most of the 57,000 who returned were heads of families. The return was organized in the following way. All those wishing to return were registered in the camps: their family name, village, and assets were all noted in order to facilitate family reunification in the future and to ensure that rehabilitation assistance appropriate to the needs of the individual would be given. These registration cards were taken back home by the people and used in all their dealings with REST. The route of return was the same as that used for the exodus.

The organization of the return provided fewer problems than the exodus. Most people were much stronger than they had been on the way out and were therefore less reliant on medical assistance. The numbers involved were much smaller and as there was no pressure to reach safety, the refugees could rest for as many days as required at each transit centre before moving on. However, there were two major problems - cholera and Dergue military attacks. Cholera came into Tigre from Sudan and from the government-held areas. As REST and the TPLF had prior warning about cholera both in Sudan and amongst the government's soldiers, REST

was able to request a large number of drugs from international donors and prepare for the control of the likely epidemic. When the epidemic did hit Tigre it was controlled both through health education and through the use of drugs, despite the government's apparently deliberate policy of spreading the disease. (Instead of providing health facilities which isolated the victims, soldiers with cholera were left to die in the villages.) However, large concentrations of people obviously impeded the control of an epidemic. To cope with this, REST set up cholera units at each transit centre and medical personnel walked with the people to assist with any sick. In this way the death rate from cholera in Tigre remained low.

Following an assessment of the effects of the government offensive and the likely risks to returnees, REST decided to go ahead with the planned repatriation although the route was changed so that military activity would be avoided. But attacks were already decreasing and they eventually ended in May, enabling the refugees to return safely.

Once home, it was obviously essential that these people should be given rehabilitation assistance in the form of seeds, oxen, and tools. However, as has already been mentioned, there were inadequate funds for the rehabilitation programme and the funds that did arrive were late. As a result, only a small number of the hoped-for 100,000 oxen were purchased and not enough seeds. There was also a long delay in the arrival of tools, which meant that not nearly enough could be distributed in time for the planting season. For people who needed physical help in preparing their land and planting, assistance had to be given on a strict basis of need. There was much sharing of implements, and people had to borrow money in order to purchase tools. Surveys show that by the end of the planting season only 600,000 people lacked the means to plant or were displaced from their land and could therefore not plant. Moreover, it is expected 2,000,000 people will need emergency aid in 1986 because their crops were destroyed by drought, army worm, flood, or hail. 300,000 families will need rehabilitation

assistance - this includes those refugee families whose heads of families remained in Sudan during 1985 and who therefore received no rehabilitation assistance.

#### Planned repatriation: 1986

Meanwhile in Sudan, the situation in the camps in the east has stabilized. Since September 1985 no more refugees have left Tigre under REST's auspices. The death rate has dropped dramatically in most camps; some refugees have been able to work in the nearby fields and thus earn money, and some have received training in health care. The camps are now beginning to take on a semblance of normality: people have taken up their local trades, there is singing and dancing at night, and markets operate during the day. The majority of the people are healthy and are just waiting for the opportunity to return home. Like those refugees who have already left they do not see exile as the answer to their problems and believe that the only future hope lies in returning to Tigre to live off their lands again.

The 1986 return is again being organized by REST. In November surveys were conducted in the camps to assess the desire to return and the numbers likely to be involved. The results showed that ninety-nine per cent of all those in the reception centres wish to return home during the first half of 1986. REST then evaluated the amount of relief aid necessary for the refugees. This will be required until the next harvest is ready in late 1986/early 1987 for those whose heads of families did not return during 1985 and for those who returned but did not have a successful crop. Thus, the date of departure depends on the refugees' wishes, REST's capacity to support them, the needs inside Tigre, and the planting season. Also to be considered are the health conditions in the camps - for example the planned dates of vaccinations and the programme of treatment of tuberculosis.

Taking all these factors into account it has been decided that the first people to return will leave in January 1986. Most of these will be the dependant

of those who returned during 1985 and people who live in the west of Tigre where the harvest has been very good this year. The second return will be during March/April, allowing people enough time to reach home before the planting season, but reducing the reliance upon emergency aid by up to four months. This will allow REST time to transport enough food into Tigre for those returning. However this plan is dependent on the wishes of the people involved, and while REST can try to persuade them that these are the best times to go, the ultimate decision will, rightly, remain with the individuals concerned.

Having made this plan, the next stage is for REST to inform the agencies involved with health care in the camps of the intended departure. REST hopes to make use of the skills some refugees developed and encourage them to continue to work in the health programme in Tigre. Hopefully the special health needs of certain groups - for example those on TB treatment - can be catered for.

Repatriation procedures are undertaken with as great care as the exodus. The refugees are registered - their names, whereabouts of family, village, and assessment of needs all noted. This record is retained and used in all dealings with REST.

The fundraising for the return comes under the larger programme of requests for relief and rehabilitation. Certain essential items are specifically itemized - for example, clothing, cooking utensils and other household goods, and shoes - for without these the vast majority will be walking home barefoot. It is hoped that this year the funds for the rehabilitation programme will arrive on time, so that goods can be purchased at a price not inflated by demand just before the planting season. This will mean that more rehabilitation assistance can be purchased with the money available.

The people will return along the same route. The organization of the return is expected to be easier than the exodus because the people are generally healthier, there will hopefully be no cholera to contend with, there will be more food inside Tigre, more water is available, and REST has had the opportunit

to learn from its previous experience how to make the process more efficient. The refugees who have been trained in the camps will be working as health workers with the returnees, looking after the people from their villages. They will also play an important role in the treatment of TB, ensuring that drugs are available and that people do take them. The maintenance of TB treatment is a large organizational task. However, with the assistance of the health workers, the individual's own knowledge about medication, and REST's determination that resistant TB should not enter Tigre, REST is cautiously optimistic that people on TB treatment will be able to return safely.

Inside Tigre the needs are obviously great and these will inevitably be exacerbated by the return of over 100,000 people. However, as in the return in 1985, risks have to be taken if people are to end their reliance on emergency supplies in another country. The requests for emergency and rehabilitation assistance are an attempt to minimize these risks in the short term. In the long term, the development work of the agricultural departments of TPLF and REST is aimed at combating the effects of drought through a number of programmes: soil and water conservation projects which maximize the use of available water and minimize soil erosion; experimentation with drought resistant crops; changes in farming practices, including ploughing with only one ox; selection of seeds that will grow more effectively in local conditions; development of the technique of contour ploughing which maximizes the use of available water; and the growing of vegetables that produce a high yield per hectare.

In this way REST and the TPLF are continuing their determined efforts to provide for the people of Tigre in their own areas in the hope that sufficient aid will be given to avoid future exoduses to Sudan.

#### **International aid**

After a slow start the international community responded generously to the refugee crisis in eastern Sudan. While REST and the refugees are extremely grateful for the assistance given to these people, it should be noted that this

has not been matched by aid given to the people who were at risk inside Tigre. Although this is difficult to quantify, it appears that the international community has spent more on the 200,000 people in Sudan than they have on more than 3,000,000 people whose lives were put at risk in Tigre by the 1984-5 famine.

The reasons for this inequitable distribution of aid can be understood in terms of the needs of the agencies involved and the actions of the Ethiopian government. There is no agency to cope with people displaced within liberated areas. UNHCR can only help refugees; its mandate prevents it from giving any assistance to refugees returning to the liberated areas or to those internally displaced. The Ethiopian government's policy of refusing to allow agencies to operate effectively within northern Ethiopia and of actively discouraging famine victims from going to the towns through its 'resettlement' and conscription programmes, has prevented many agencies from trying to assist the people within their home areas. Finally, owing to their organizational structure, mandate, or politics, some voluntary agencies find it much easier to work in a refugee camp than to work with people in their home areas.

The combination of these factors has prevented some agencies from responding to the crisis in Tigre in a long-term way. Thus, while they have kept alive those who came to Sudan, the problems in Tigre have continued. Currently the situation is serious and the amount of assistance REST has been pledged to date will not cover the needs. Unless further assistance is forthcoming the people will be faced with the same choice as in 1984 and 1985 - to go to Sudan and receive assistance or risk their lives inside Tigre. Given the current level of assistance REST is estimating that between 60,000 and 100,000 people may have no alternative during 1986 but to go to Sudan. Such exoduses are obviously not the solution to the problems inside Tigre and do not reflect the wishes of the people.

## Recommendations

The first recommendation is that agencies and the international community should respond to the determination of the refugees to return home, and should support this programme with financial and material assistance. Without food aid and rehabilitation assistance, the programme will not succeed and this year's returnees may end up being next year's refugees.

Secondly, the international community should shift the focus of its attention from the refugees to the root causes of the refugee exodus and respond accordingly with financial assistance to address the needs inside Tigre. While we appreciate the difficulties and constraints under which some agencies operate we must also stress that responding to the problems inside Tigre is the only way in which any long-term solutions will be reached.

It is essential that agencies do not see the repatriation as the end to the problems in Tigre, but rather as part of the process of overcoming the problems - a process that will involve at least as much support and assistance as was given for the initial life-saving work in the camps during 1984 and 1985.

Agencies should, however, continue their support and assistance to the Tigrean refugees in Sudan - both those who will stay there and those who are expected to cross the border during 1986.

As discussed before, UN agencies are incapable of dealing with the problem in a long-term way because of their mandates which prevent them from giving assistance to those displaced within Tigre or to those returning to Tigre. This contradicts one of UNHCR's main aims - that of attacking the root causes of exoduses. The Ethiopian government will not give help to those who originate from areas it does not control. By refusing to help REST aid its own people in the TPLF-controlled areas, the UNHCR - an organization set up to be 'non-political' in its work - is forced into a demonstrably political position. Some amendment in the mandate is surely required if the UN is to play an effective role in the overall care of refugees and displaced people throughout the world.

In conclusion, we look towards an effective repatriation programme, one that will facilitate self-sufficiency and end reliance on emergency aid. We also look towards a long-term approach from the international community - one that will attack the problem at its roots and prevent the tragic and traumatic consequence of refugee life.