

Eritrean Refugees of Northern Ethiopia

The Horn of Africa is one of the most volatile areas in the world. Due this the countries in the area host numerous refugees who are escaping turmoil and persecution in their home. With it's central location, Ethiopia is an important host for refugees from Southern Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia.

For the last year I've been living in Shimelba refugee camp which house more than 12,000 Eritreans. I've been working with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as Gender-Based Violence Coordinator. It's an interesting time because I am the only international living in the camp, so I have an easy opportunity to interact well with the refugees and the my Ethiopian colleagues. The camp is run by the Ethiopian Government who manages, secures and provides health care for the camp under the prevue of UNHCR. IRC and and another organization called ZOA are the only other agencies providing support. IRC helps supply clean water and sanitation, education for children and adults, HIV and reproductive health awareness, support for the elderly, disabled and youth, income generation support / trainings as well as assistance to women who've suffered sexual or domestic violence. ZOA provides some income generation trainings too.



Between 1999-2000 Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a bitter border dispute that killed over 20,000 soldiers and countless civilians. After the war, both countries began to deport citizens of Ethiopian or



Eritrean origin to their respective background countries. In Ethiopia, the government went through the roster of people who voted for Eritrea's independence in 1993 and stated that if you want your own country you should live there and promptly put them on buses headed for the border. Eritrea reciprocated. Those people who were deported lost everything and had to start all over again. Those forced back to Eritrea have been treated, basically, as 2nd class citizens. The Horn of Africa is one of the most volatile areas in the world. Due to this the countries in the area host numerous refugees who are escaping turmoil and persecution in their home. With its central location, Ethiopia is an important host for refugees from Southern Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia.



The camp is made up of Tigrinians (60%) Kunamas (40%), and other ethnicities such as Afar and Saho. The Kunama, who are pastoralists living on the Ethiopian-Eritrean border, have been blamed by the Eritrean government for not fighting the Ethiopians when they occupied Eritrean land. They'd been traditionally treated as second class citizens and felt that it didn't matter which government pushed them around they had cows and sheep to feed. Since the end of the war, many Kunama have fled their territory to avoid persecution in Eritrea. have been pushed around throughout their history ironically they refugees in lands that were once theirs and still have towns named in Kunama, like Shire the western Tigray regional hub, even though Kunamas have not been in the area for generations. As they say Shimelba "It's nice. It's like we've return home." Unfortunately, the Tigrinians who live there don't think it's the Kunama's home as well and the chance of gaining their land back when they can return to Eritrea is remote as the government has started to send people to occupy the land.



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In essence, Eritrea is turning into a North Korea on the Red Sea and people want out. This is sad because most of the Eritreans that I've met are extremely innovative and take initiative to improve their lives. This is the first camp I've been to in which there are barbers with swiveling barber chairs, pool halls, generators that sell electricity, theaters with multi-channelled satellite TV (I've got 3 channels), bars, discos, restaurants, and cafes. Half of the camp we call little Asmara, because they've been able to replicate a more urban lifestyle. (It sounds and looks amazing but when you scratch the surface, most of the refugees are in a very vulnerable state in which they peddle some of their 15kg of monthly wheat ration to buy cloths for the children and other household necessities.) Sadly, the refugees could be a great asset in developing their new nation, if the government recognized that creativity and innovation cannot be pushed and pulled but needs space and encouragement to take off.

