

VOLUME 12

# New Routes

PUBLISHED BY THE LIFE & PEACE INSTITUTE

2/2007

A journal of  
peace research  
and action



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*War, drought and political unrest have forced millions of people in the Horn of Africa to leave their homes and live as refugees or internally displaced persons. Their situations are, however, disparate, and there is no simple single remedy for the hardships of these people – except peace and stability in the region.*

# Peace the only solution to displaced people's needs

Elizabeth Ferris

The human costs of conflict, instability and natural disasters in the Horn of Africa have been almost unbearably high. The lives of millions of women, children and men have been shattered by violence, while political and military leaders have sought power and control of resources. In some places, peace agreements remain fragile. Elsewhere peace negotiations have yet to produce results, which means that many of those displaced by the violence continue to live in limbo – or terror.

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Horn of Africa are a disparate group. Some have been displaced for many years while others are hoping to soon return to their communities, and still others were forced to flee their homes last week. The situation of displacement in the region is a dynamic and complicated one. While there is considerable awareness of the situation of those displaced by the violence in Darfur, few people outside the region are aware that there are still Ethiopians displaced from the 1998 Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict – even after the peace agreement was signed almost seven years ago – or that over 150,000 Somali refugees have been living in Kenya for more than five years.

Refugees and IDPs are not just an issue of humanitarian concern. Displacement of populations has become a strategy of war by governments and militia groups throughout the region. Their fate is tied to both domestic and regional political dynamics, and at the same time their very presence influences political and strategic discussions. This article presents a brief overview of displacement in the Horn of Africa as a contribution to the debate on the

larger issues of peace and security in the region.

Statistics of numbers of displaced people – both refugees and internally displaced people – reveal two trends: first, there are a large number of IDPs and refugees in protracted situations, which are defined as populations of more than 25,000 who have been displaced for more than five years.<sup>1</sup> These represent the legacy of unresolved

conflicts. At the same time, there are often dramatic new flows of displaced people as illustrated by the increasing displacement from both Somalia and Darfur. It should be noted that these recent displacements are generally not captured in statistics but rather in news reports. The table below gives an overview of displacement in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan by country of origin.

## IDPs and Refugees in the Horn of Africa

Country of origin	Number of IDPs	Number of IDPs in protracted situations	Number of refugees, 31 December 2005	Number of refugees in protracted situations, 1 January 2005
Eritrea	40,000 – 45,000	40,000 – 45,000 <sup>2</sup>	143,594 10,700/Ethiopia 116,746/Sudan	111,000/Sudan
Ethiopia	100,000 – 280,000	62,000 <sup>3</sup>	65,293 14,862/Kenya 14,633/Sudan	
Somalia	400,000 <sup>4</sup>	300,000 – 400,000	394,760 9,828/Djibouti 15,901/Ethiopia 150,459/Kenya <sup>5</sup> 64,000/Yemen	154,000/Kenya 64,000/Yemen 25,000/Djibouti
Sudan	5,355,000	3,000,000	693,267	45,000/DRC 90,000/Ethiopia 68,000/Kenya 215,000/Uganda

Protracted refugee situations are defined as those lasting at least five years with a population of over 25,000. Source: UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. IDP figures are taken from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org) for the most recent period available. Protracted IDP situations are defined as those lasting at least five years with a population of over 25,000. Refugee statistics are from end of 2005 as reported in 2005 *Global Refugee Trends*, UNHCR, June 2006, [www.unhcr.org/statistics](http://www.unhcr.org/statistics)

## Displacement in four countries

### Somalia

In a short article like this, it is difficult to do justice to the complexities of the many situations that have displaced people in the Horn of Africa. Somalia, for example, has had large numbers of displaced people for many years.<sup>6</sup> A devastating drought in 2006 forced people to leave their communities, the current conflict has claimed up to half a million lives, and over two million people – out of Somalia's 8.22 million population – are considered vulnerable. Prior to the latest outbreak of violence, there were some 250,000 IDPs living in Mogadishu.

The ongoing struggles for power and resources have led warlords to deliberately displace people from other clans, adding to the widespread movement of hundreds of thousands of people in recent months. While Somaliland has managed to reintegrate a part of the almost one million returned refugees who fled the land in the late 1980s, many live in makeshift camps in urban areas together with IDPs and new arrivals from the conflict in the south.

The displacement of Somalis reflects the political realities in that country, but also complicates relations between governments in the region. For example, when the number of Somalis fleeing into Kenya increased dramatically in late 2006, the Kenyan government closed the border, and the UN High Commissioner

assistance programs for Somalia are managed from Nairobi.

The establishment of peace and security in Somalia is a prerequisite for solutions for both IDPs and refugees. And yet even if a political settlement is reached, there are many long-term obstacles to IDP and refugee return. For example, unresolved property issues are one of the core obstacles to IDP returns, and resolution of those claims not only require an effective judicial system, but also records of land ownership.

### Ethiopia

Displacement of people in Ethiopia also stems from several sources: ethnic conflicts, drought, the government's regionalization policy, and the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea. Ethnic conflicts in Gambella between the Anuak and the Nuer displaced thousands of people, and incursions by rebel groups from these ethnic groups from Sudan have caused further displacement in the border regions. Tensions along the regional border between Somali and Oromiya have displaced some 80,000 people, while drought and flooding have caused even more to leave their home.

In February of this year, ethnic violence led almost 800 Ethiopian pastoralists to seek safety in Kenya where they were repatriated back to Ethiopia. Traditionally a centralized state, the Ethiopian government's regionalization policy is exacerbating tensions between the country's 80 ethnic groups<sup>8</sup>, and the government's intention to resettle people to more fertile parts of the country is raising questions about state support for forced displacement of large numbers of people.

About 100,000 people were killed in the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and over 360,000 were internally displaced. At that time, Ethiopia deported tens of thousands of persons identified as Eritreans, while Eritrea did the same with Ethiopians living on its territory. While most Ethiopian IDPs returned home after the ceasefire of June 2000 and the December 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement, an estimated 62,000 people remain displaced in the Tigray region.

In Ethiopia, as in other countries, the issue of who is an IDP and when that condition ends, is a hot political issue.

Presently the government does not consider people who have been displaced for more than five years to be IDPs, and international agencies find it difficult to monitor returns, making reliable statistics hard to come by.

### Eritrea

The Ethiopian-Eritrean war displaced more than one million of Eritrea's<sup>9</sup> 3.8 million people, most of whom returned to their communities after the 2000 ceasefire. By 2005, the number of IDPs was estimated to have dropped to around 45,000, and a year later, the Eritrean government decided to return the large majority of IDPs to their villages or areas of origin near the Temporary Security Zone. But return to border regions is difficult given the deadlock over demarcation of the border and the presence of landmines.

The IDPs in Eritrea depend almost completely on relief assistance, living in makeshift settlements in camps and with host communities. But in 2005 the government imposed restrictions on international agencies and blocked distribution of food in favor of its own cash-for-work projects, leading the government's largest food aid donor, USAID, to withdraw, as did some 24 of the 37 NGOs active in Eritrea. The IDPs in Eritrea are only part of a larger movement of Eritreans, including one million former IDPs, expellees from Ethiopia, and refugees who have returned to their home villages – all of whom depend on food assistance. As in Ethiopia, limitations on NGO activity make accurate statistics difficult.

### Sudan

Displacement – both internal and external – in Sudan is Africa's largest uprooted population and, as in the other countries of the Horn, includes several groups of people. Those displaced by the civil war between the central government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army number some 3.2 million, of whom 2 million are southerners living in and around Khartoum – also the world's largest urban displaced population. In response to the 2005 peace agreement, some 1.2 million Sudanese have returned to their homes in the southern part of the country. But returns are slow, in part because of the lack of infrastructure and public services for the returnees. Almost all of the IDPs who have returned have done so spontaneously without waiting for UN assistance.



***The Ethiopian government's regionalization policy is exacerbating tensions between the country's 80 ethnic groups.***

for Refugees had to appeal to the Kenyan government not to send them back to Somalia.<sup>7</sup> Human smuggling of Somalis to Yemen has not only claimed a large toll in human life, but is also evidence of the regional dimensions to Somalia's internal crisis.

Conditions for IDPs in Somalia – as indeed throughout the region – are precarious. They face high morbidity rates, lack access to safe water and sanitation, live in crowded conditions in slum settlements, and have difficulty accessing education. International humanitarian access to displaced and other vulnerable groups is extremely difficult and many





*Somali children looking through a bullet ridden window.*

The government of Southern Sudan encourages IDPs to return – apparently in preparation for the November 2007 census.<sup>10</sup> However, return is problematic and there are cases where IDPs living in Khartoum have gone home, only to return to Khartoum as conditions are better there than in their home communities. As if the situation weren't complicated enough, incursions by rebel armed groups from both Chad and Uganda have further threatened security in the south.

The conflict in Darfur flared up in early 2003 and since then has claimed some 450,000 lives and displaced almost 2 million people. The violence has spilled over into Chad. Not only are there 220,000 Darfuri refugees in Chad, but there are Chadian refugees in Sudan and growing numbers of internally displaced persons within Chad. In spite of a peace agreement in May 2006 (signed by only one of the rebel factions) and the presence of an African Peacekeeping Force, the violence has continued, and the Sudanese government has resisted UN efforts to establish a hybrid UN-African Union


force to stabilize the region. Meanwhile, the world's largest international humanitarian operation is taking place in Darfur with some 14,000 humanitarian workers, but conditions are still abysmal for much of the population. Security concerns and violence continue.

### **Peace the only real solution**

The displacement of people in the Horn of Africa is the human consequence of the conflicts and political repression taking place in the region. It can only be resolved by negotiating and implementing peace agreements. In the meantime, governments in the region have a responsibility to protect those who are displaced, whether they are internally displaced or have fled across borders in search of protection. Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan (but not Eritrea) are all parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol.

In 1998, the Organisation of African Unity Ministerial Meeting on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa adopted the "Khartoum

Declaration", which calls on member states to seek durable solutions to the problem of forced population displacement in their countries and to adopt national legislation that protects their well-being. A second ministerial conference on Internally Displaced Persons in the Sub-Region of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development adopted another "Khartoum Declaration" in 2003, which reaffirms the primary responsibility of national governments to protect and assist IDPs and calls on governments in the region to incorporate the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into national legislation.

Ultimately, of course, the solution for displaced people in the Horn of Africa depends on the establishment of peace, justice, and security. But this is a long-term process and until those conditions are achieved, there is an urgent need to ensure that the basic human rights of the millions of uprooted people in the region are addressed. This is a fundamental responsibility of governments, whether the task is protecting the human rights of one's own displaced citizens or upholding the basic right of all human beings to seek asylum in another country. 

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees* 2006. Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 106-107. Also Elizabeth G. Ferris "Protracted IDP Situations", forthcoming, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> 8,900 IDP households in Gash Barka & Debub.

<sup>3</sup> IDP figures from OCHA-Ethiopia as cited by IDMC. Protracted IDPs include an estimated 62,000 displaced in Tigray as a result of the 1998 Eritrean-Ethiopian border dispute, even after December 2000 Peace Agreement.

<sup>4</sup> IDP figure of 400,000 from September 2006, but 100,000 more fled Mogadishu in February-March 2007. "UN appeals for end to suffering as thousands flee deadly fighting in Somalia's capital", UN News Centre, 2 April 2007. The number of protracted IDPs includes drought IDPs.

<sup>5</sup> By September 2006, this figure had climbed to 240,000. <http://www.wfp.org/english/?ModuleID=137&Key=2253>

<sup>6</sup> This description is based, unless otherwise noted, on "Somalia: Fear of renewed displacement as rise of Islamists heightens tensions", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2 October 2006. [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)

<sup>7</sup> See for example, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200701010001.html>; <http://www.wfp.org/english/?ModuleID=137&Key=2253>

<sup>8</sup> See "Ethiopia: government recognition of conflict IDPs crucial to addressing their plight", Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 16 April 2006. [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)

<sup>9</sup> See especially, "Eritrea: Uncertain future for thousands of returning IDPs", 13 June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, "Sudan: Slow IDP return to south while Darfur crisis continues unabated", 17 August 2006, [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)