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New Home At Last for 8,800 Expellees

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Gherenfit: A place where expellees can begin to rebuild their lives.



New life for expelled families.

A community of 2,870 families who were expelled from Ethiopia in 1998 then moved from one camp to another in over four years, achieved what seemed an elusive dream, this May, when they were resettled in a permanent, new home offering the possibility of ending years of dependence on relief assistance.

The families, comprising 8,800 people, made the move with the assistance of the Eritrea Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Local Government – Gash Barka Administration. The project was funded by UNDP and the Governments of Italy and the Netherlands.

From the barren, desolate Shelab camp in the Gash Barka region, the expellees relocated by trucks over a one-week period starting May 20, just after schools had closed. Three tracts of freshly cleared, virgin land had been prepared for them, at Gherenfit East, Gherenfit West and Wedi Emmi which are also in Gash Barka.



ICRC tents provide temporary shelter.

Shortly after their arrival, the families started building new homes made of wood, and covered with tents and mats.

“The ICRC supplied 1,500 new tents but more are needed,” says Professor Têcheste Ahderom, UNDP, Senior Advisor on Recovery.

After seven days of living in the new place, Tsege Mahari, a 40 year-old mother of seven

says: “This place is better than Shelab. Except for the initial problem of water, there is firewood and there is also land. When we came there was a water shortage in the first few days. But in the past two to three days we’ve been getting enough water. Sometimes 40 litres per day.”



Tsege Mahari: “This place is better than Shelab.”

The origins of this story began with the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to Professor Techeste, “a number of rural and urban people of Eritrean origin were expelled from Ethiopia as a result of the war. Until this recent resettlement, there were 16,811 rural expellees from Ethiopia spread in many camps in Eritrea.”

Rural expellees are unlike other displaced people, who live with the hope of one day returning to their homes. As Teclémichael Woldegiorgis, Deputy Commissioner of ERREC explained: “These people really have been living in Ethiopia for generations. Unfortunately, they were expelled and became homeless.”

According to Mehreteab Fessehaie, ERREC Director General for Repatriation and Reintegration, the initial plan was to resettle the families in 1999, one year after their arrival, but when the war intensified, that became difficult, especially because the areas targeted for their resettlement had become part of the theatre of war. The expellees found themselves moving from camp to camp, the last of which was Shelab.



Rural expellees: making the most of life despite their ordeals.

Professor Techeste says, the resettlement of the 8,800 rural expellees finally became a reality with the restoration of relative stability, when ERREC and the Ministry of Local Government

teamed up with the UNDP’s Post-War Eritrea Recovery (PoWER) Programme to coordinate the move.

Firouz Sobhani, UNDP, Senior Deputy Resident Representative, noted that, “this is the first time since the beginning of the border conflict that UNDP and the Government have been involved in moving expellees out of a camp, and resettling them. It is also the first time since the conflict that a



Professor Techeste Aherom, UNDP, Senior Advisor, Firouz Sobhani, UNDP Senior Deputy Resident Representative in an interview with Diane Bailey of Radio UNMEE.

new virgin area is opening up to be settled.”

The choice of Gherenfit in Gash Barka, one of the bread basket areas of Eritrea, was based on its suitability for farming. “The soil at Gherenfit is very fertile. Given the

right amount of water it can be a self-sustaining venture, the main problem was the lack of water,” says Professor Techeste.

The secret to the success of this resettlement project, according to UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, Simon R. Nhongo, is the relationship that was first established with the host community of 40,000 people living in Lalaigash close to Gherenfit. Mr. Nhongo says the locals were assured they could share the schools, health centers and water provided for the resettled community.



UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, Simon R. Nhongo: Inspecting the new reservoir.

“One of the important things to remember is that this process would not have been possible if the host community were not consulted and we made sure to ask them how they felt about this. They have closely followed this event and this is a great outcome for the host community as well as the resettled families”, says Mr. Nhongo.

To make the place habitable, the project organizers undertook a feat of engineering technology by constructing an entirely new water system drawing on groundwater sourced



The Gash river bed: Dry from months of drought.

close to the dried up Gash river bed, 8km away from the actual settlements.

“Instead of using heavy equipment, the displaced people themselves were employed as casual labour to clear the land for cultivation. That gave them the opportunity to earn some income,” says Mr. Sobhani. The Ministry of Local Government dug the boreholes with funds provided by the UNDP/PoWER Programme and from contributions made by the Italian Government. However, “the first attempt was not that encouraging,” says Professor Techeste. “Four boreholes were dug and they were all dry. After much deliberation four new boreholes were dug; pumps were installed and they turned out to be very productive,” he says.

The UNDP/PoWER Programme then hired an engineer to complete the work.



The 95,000 litre balancing reservoir

Costing around US \$ 420,000, the system is made up of a series of boreholes and one balancing reservoir at the source with a capacity of 95,000 litres, located near the Gash River.

There is also one

52,000-litre reservoir in each of the three resettlement sites. Some of the boreholes were dug as deep as 68 meters down. A motor pump sends the water to the resettlement sites (8km away) along pipes buried underground, to avoid damage by elephants and cattle. Water flows from the elevated reservoirs to the three residential sites where the communities now live.



Water is plentiful at Gherenfit.

The water system took five months to build and will last for 20 years. Now each family can have 20 litres of water per person per day from nearby fountains. Some are also using the water for their cattle. Long queues are frequently seen at the fountains caused by lack of proper management, according to experts. That is a situation they plan to correct.

“There are plenty of water outlets everywhere but the management of this is what counts. While, some have 80 to 100

litres others have only 20 litres. When you have good administration to complement this system, it will reduce the numbers in queues at the fountains,” says Professor Techeste.



Water queues need to be managed.

Mehreteab Fessehaie,

ERREC, Director General for Repatriation and Reintegration, says the community will be provided with “a temporary school and a health clinic financed by the PoWER Programme.” The Italian NGO, Movimondo will build the



A makeshift school is about to be installed.

health center while another Italian NGO, CESVI will erect the school. Mr. Fessehaie says, “the next step for the resettled families is to see how they can pick up their lives.” Though the World Food Programme will ensure they receive food aid, each family is keen to get back on its feet and become self-sufficient. “They have something now which they can call home,”

Resettled people and host community will have access to education and health care.

land, put them on their feet, and soon you will be surprised. They will not want to stretch their hand out for aid”, he says. The Government of Eritrea has allocated two hectares of land to each family and already many are clearing land, burning brush in the hope of being able to cultivate and plant, if the rains fall in good time and measure. UNDP is providing seeds and farm implements such as ploughs.



Resettled families now have the chance to farm and breed livestock. The main challenge now is the climate.

Because of the continuing poor rains, Mr. Teclemichael Woldegiorgis says the communities will receive other forms of assistance to help them earn a livelihood. “The aim is to get rid of their dependency.” He says.

Women head most of the households, which is why UNDP/PoWER has secured funding from the Italian government to encourage them to breed and sell chicks. Mr. Fessehaie says the NGO CESVI has trained all the prospective chick breeders. Mr. Fessehaie says the resettled community “has a comparative advantage. They



Majority of breadwinners are women.

have a better farming area, close to the Gash river. There are many roads nearby to other centers. In about 2 years this place will become semi-urban. Kids will be able to go to school here up to 7th grade.”

Teklai Okbazgi is a 65-year old father of four who after having been resettled in Gherenfit, expressed relief that the years of displacement and homelessness were over. “These four years since we were deported, we had to walk from Tigray to Eritrea. [In Eritrea] We went to Faulina then Jehah. We are happy and we were willing to come here. [Gherenfit] Compared to Shelab we have land to plough and we can keep our livestock. In Shelab we were living like prisoners. Here we can farm. In the long run we will be happy. We want to plant sorghum, millet. What we need are tools and seeds.”



Farmer and father, Teklai Okbazgi
“What we need are tools and seeds.”

With the resettlement of the people from Shelab to Gherenfit, the numbers of rural expellees still waiting to be resettled in Eritrea now stands at 8,011. Of these, 5,834 are living in camps in Kotobia, 229 in Mai-Alba while a further 1,948 are in Adi Keshi. The people living in Adi Keshi are also soon to be resettled at Ugumu, a village close to Gherenfit. For all these people, resettlement is the first step back to normal life and as Mr. Woldegiorgis puts it: “This is a good beginning for reintegration. We have a long way to go. It’s more difficult achieving sustainable housing and improving livelihoods. The long term goal is to follow up with improvements and identify whatever problems they are facing,” he says.



Deputy Commissioner ERREC, Teclemichael Woldegiorgis



Resettled people have “a long way to go.” - Teclemichael Woldegiorgis.