

Challenges of rehabilitation of IDPs in northern Ethiopia

by Tamirat Mulu

The border conflict that erupted in May 1998 along the thousand-kilometre border between Ethiopia and Eritrea left behind a legacy of displacement, insecurity, damaged public infrastructure and the loss of household assets and livelihoods of more than 300,000 IDPs and a further 95,000 Ethiopians forced to leave Eritrea.

How can war-affected areas of Ethiopia meet the challenges of post-war recovery at the household and community level in order to enable an effective return to productive and secure lives?

Women and children comprise three quarters of those displaced. Many are malnourished, have untreated injuries, are without productive assets and are forced to live in makeshift camps and caves. They have lost both livelihoods and dignity. Their children no longer attend school.

While around 70% of IDPs have been able to return home since the signing of the Algiers peace agreement in December 2000, full resumption of agricultural production is still limited by lack of adequate inputs, proximity to areas which have not been demined, unexploded ordinance and lack of shelter in communities where original housing was destroyed.

Food assistance has been provided by the World Food Programme and USAID and other donors have lent funds to enable repair of damaged infrastructure and restoration of government services. NGOs have additionally provided medicine, clothing, blankets, plastic sheeting, building materials and safe water. As food needs increase elsewhere in Ethiopia, WFP is under pressure to end food assistance to IDPs.

Among the key challenges facing displaced communities, the Ethiopian authorities and the international community are:

- painfully slow progress in clearing the one million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines planted on 100,000 hectares of land along the border
- the continuing closure of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border due to ongoing tension and failure to settle outstanding border demarcation issues
- inability of communities to resume the cross-border trade which previously constituted a major source of income on which the livelihoods of large numbers of households depended
- the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, spread throughout war-affected areas by the high concentration of military personnel and commercial sex workers and increased high risk behaviour among IDPs
- lack of alternative income opportunities for displaced women left with no choice except to engage in prostitution.



There is an urgent need to:

- increase and accelerate demining programmes
- make more rapid progress on final demarcation of the disputed border
- initiate and fund peace, reconciliation and confidence-building programmes
- provide IDPs with counselling and vocational training to help them become more self-reliant
- continue provision of food aid to IDPs until they are able to start earning an income
- address the particular rehabilitation needs of such vulnerable groups within IDP populations as female-headed households.

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