3 September 2009

Ethiopia: Human rights violations and conflicts continue to cause displacement
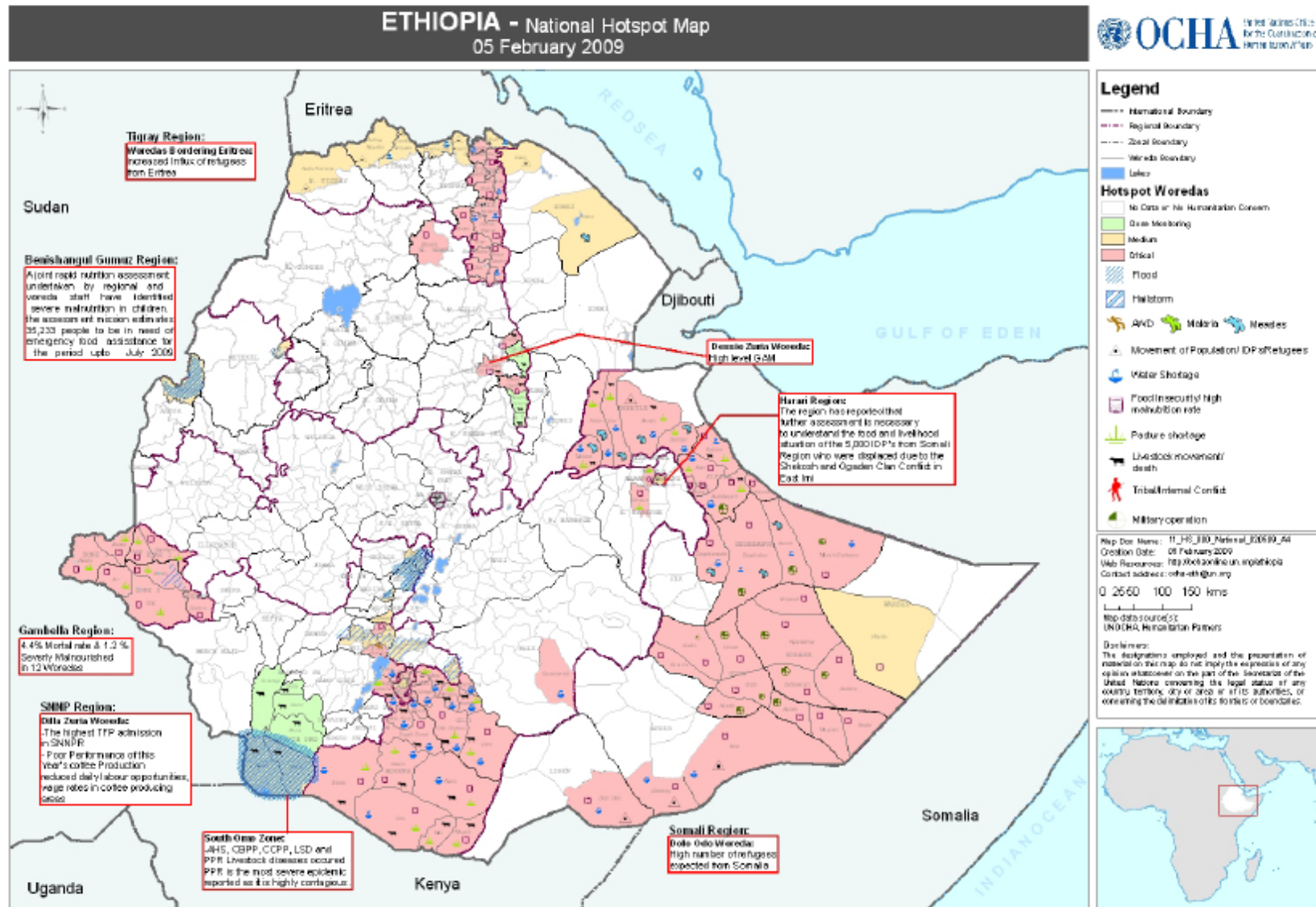
For decades, Ethiopia has been affected by famine and conflict. In 2009, there have been various reports of internal displacement resulting from conflicts and human rights violations perpetrated by the army and groups opposed to the government. It is difficult to establish the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) as neither the government nor any international organisation has undertaken a profiling exercise. The access of humanitarian and human rights organisations and the media to some areas of the country has been restricted.

The ongoing conflicts in Somali Region between the army and the Ogaden National Liberation Front, and in the south and south-west of the country with the Oromo Liberation Front, both pose serious security, humanitarian and protection challenges. The impact on civilians of the conflict in Somali Region has been likened to that of Darfur. Meanwhile, there are also conflicts in at least five of the country's nine regions with causes ranging from competition over scarce water and pasture resources to disputes over administrative boundaries. In February 2009 alone, some 160,000 people were driven from their homes by conflict between the Garre of the Somali region and the Boran of the Oromiya region over a contested piece of land.

Displacement in Ethiopia is well documented but there is no evidence of durable solutions for IDPs. There is no agency or ministry mandated to respond to issues of forced internal displacement. Even though Ethiopia is actively involved in the drafting of the African Union convention on internally displaced people, there is growing evidence to suggest that conflicts in the country have far-reaching implications for protection and humanitarian assistance for internally displaced people. In a context of widespread impunity, no-one sanctioning violence that leads to displacement has been prosecuted.

The absence of political efforts to resolve internal conflicts and the continuing border dispute with Eritrea presents an ongoing serious risk of renewed conflict and displacement in the Horn of Africa. If the government does not improve humanitarian access, affected IDPs and other vulnerable people will continue to face a protection and humanitarian crisis.

National Hotspots in Ethiopia, February 2009

ETHIOPIA - National Hotspot Map
05 February 2009

Legend

- International Boundary
- Regional Boundary
- Zonal Boundary
- Woreda Boundary
- Lakes

Hotspot Woredas
- No Data or No Humanitarian Concern
- Close Monitoring
- Medium
- Critical
- Flood
- Hailstorm
- AWD
- Malaria
- Measles
- Movement of Population/ IDPs/Refugees
- Water Shortage
- Food Insecurity/ high malnutrition rate
- Pasture shortage
- Livestock movement/ death
- Tribal/Internal Conflict
- Military operation

Tigray Region:
Woredas Bordering Eritrea Increased Influx of refugees from Eritrea

Benishangul Gumuz Region:
A joint rapid nutrition assessment undertaken by regional and woreda staff have identified severe malnutrition in children, the assessment mission estimates 35,233 people to be in need of emergency food assistance for the period upto July 2009.

Gambella Region:
4.4% Mortal rate & 1.2 % Severly Malnourished in 12 Woredas

SNNP Region:
Delta Zuria Woreda:
-The highest TFP admission in SNNPR
- Poor Performance of this year's coffee Production reduced daily labour opportunities, wage rates in coffee producing areas

South Omo Zone:
AHS, CBPP, CCPP, LSD and PPR Livestock diseases occured PPR is the most severe epidemic reported as it is highly contagious.

Dessie Zuria Woreda:
High level GAM

Harari Region:
The region has reported that further assessment is necessary to understand the food and livelihood situation of the 5,000 IDP's from Somali Region who were displaced due to the Shekoesh and Ogaden Clan Conflict in East Imi

Somali Region:
Dolo Odo Woreda:
High number of refugees expected from Somalia

Source:

Source: UN OCHA
More maps are available on http://www.internal-displacement.org

Background: locations and causes of conflict and displacement

For decades, Ethiopia has faced severe famines and regional and international conflicts. From 1977 to 1978 it waged a war with Somalia in which the USA and USSR were involved, it fought a border war with Eritrea between 1998 and 2000, and from 2007 to early 2009 its army was pitted against insurgents (supported by Eritrea) and other nationalist groups in Somalia (The Enough Project, 9 February 2009).

Ethiopia was transformed from a unitary state to an ethnic federal state in 1994 by the new government led by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which seized power from the Dergue government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. This new constitutional order was intended to redress the ethno-national grievances among the many ethnic groups in the country (International Journal on Minority and Group Rights, 2008).

However, despite this system of ethnic federalism under which the country is divided into ethnically-defined regions and zones, in almost all cases, displacement was triggered by conflict between different ethnic groups over access to political power or scarce resources such as water and pastoral or agricultural land. There are several conflict-induced displacement situations in Ethiopia, the largest occurring in the administrative regions of Somali, Oromiya, Gambella and Tigray. In addition to these, the government's counter-insurgency activities in regions such as Oromiya, Somali, and Gambella have led to serious human rights violations which have also led to displacement of civilians (HRW, June 2008; ISS, May 2007).

In November 2008, a study undertaken by the Ethiopian NGO African Rally for Peace and Development (ARPD) showed internal armed conflicts in most of the regions of Ethiopia, including Oromiya, Tigray, Somali, Southern Nationalities and Peoples Republic (SNNPR), Afar, Gambella, and Benishangul-Gumuz (ARPD, November 2008). The US State Department's 2008 Human Rights Report on Ethiopia reported that ethnically-based conflicts in western, eastern and southern areas had resulted in an increase in killings and injuries since 2007 and the displacement of tens of thousands of people (USDoS, 25 February 2009).

According to ARPD, the major causes of conflicts within Ethiopia's regions are ethnicity, disputed border and administrative arrangements, the impact on the distribution of resources and power, large-scale spontaneous and planned migration, religious differences, and mineral extraction.

The Borena zone of Oromiya Region, Gambella Region and SNNPR have witnessed recent intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts (ARPD, November 2008; ISS, 1 May 2007). In August 2008, inter-clan conflict displaced almost 13,000 people in Gambella Region (interview with OCHA, 5 June 2009).

Even though numbers of people displaced by conflict and human rights violations are not easy to establish due to the restrictions that are placed on the activities of media reporters and humanitarian organisations wishing to profile populations in need, the UN and other international organisations estimate that over 300,000 people remain displaced by conflict or violence in Ethiopia in 2009 (interviews in Addis Ababa, June 2009).

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Somali Region

The conflict between the government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Somali Region has continued into 2009 (BBC, 9 March 2009; Garoweonline, 8 March 2009). In an August 2009 Al-Jazeera interview, Genocide Watch founder and president Gregory Stanton and the human rights activist Fowsia Abdulkadir described a "genocide-like" situation comparable to Darfur, with reports of killings and burning of villages despite the army's severe access restrictions on the media and humanitarian organisations (Al-Jazeera, 9 August 2009).

These restrictions make it impossible to establish the number or situation of people displaced by the conflict in Somali region (The Christian Science Monitor, 26 February 2008; Reuters, 27 February 2008; VOA, 25 February 2009). However, many analysts talk of displacements of hundreds of thousands of people (interviews in 2009 in Addis Ababa, Geneva, and Nairobi).

According to a 2008 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, the government's counter-insurgency campaign against the ONLF, designed to cut off civilian support to the ONLF and concentrate its rural support base in designated larger villages and towns, had caused widespread forced displacement, particularly between June and August 2007. The government had ordered civilians to relocate from small villages and pastoralist settlements to designated towns throughout the conflict-affected zones, typically ordering the villagers and nomads to move within two to seven days. To secure compliance with the evacuation orders, the army had repeatedly implemented a phased system of

terror involving the confiscation and killing of livestock, public executions, and the destruction of villages by burning (HRW, June 2008; p.33).

Oromiya Region

Another rebel group operates in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya and claims to be fighting for the autonomy of the Oromo people. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has fought the Ethiopian army since 1973. Little information is available on how this conflict has caused displacement due to government restrictions. In August 2009, the government summoned the Ambassador of Kenya, demanding that his government stop a private media company in Kenya airing an investigation on the OLF (Daily Nation, 6 August 2009).

Conflicts over disputed administrative borders

In October 2008, approximately 100,000 people were displaced as a result of conflict in the Filtu and Hudet areas over a disputed border between the ethnically-defined Oromiya and Somali Regions (IDMC interview, Addis Ababa, 9 June 2009). In the majority of cases, people sought shelter with host communities, while others scattered in the surrounding bush.

In early 2009, ethnic clashes between Somali and Oromo ethnic groups displaced tens of thousands of people. The conflict was triggered when the Oromiya regional authorities started drilling a borehole on contested land close to the dividing line between the Oromiya and Somali Regions, which has never been properly demarcated. When the Garre Somalis destroyed the rig, members of the

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Borana clan mobilised to take revenge, angry at what they saw as years of Somali encroachment. Some 300 people lost their lives during the conflict (BBC, 26 February 2009). Initial reports suggested 70,000 people were displaced (BBC, 13 March 2009), but regional government officials later put the figure at over 150,000 (interview with Somali and Oromiya officials in Moyale, 17 June 2008).

In October 2008, almost 18,000 people were displaced in Alaba district of SNNPR as a result of inter-ethnic conflict between the Arsi and the Alaba over a disputed administrative boundary (IDMC interview, Addis Ababa, 9 June 2009).

Physical security

HRW has reported that serious human rights violations have taken place in areas affected by conflict and displacement, and that the government has not investigated or brought to account the perpetrators (HRW, January 2009). A June 2008 HRW report on Somali region was very critical of the human rights records of both the Ethiopian government and army and the ONLF. According to HRW, violations included military attacks on civilians and their villages, while continuing abuses by both rebels and Ethiopian troops were posing a direct threat to the survival of people remaining in war-affected areas, and creating a pervasive culture of fear (HRW, June 2008).

HRW also reported a military campaign of forced relocations and destruction of villages in 2007 (HRW, June 2008). Villagers told HRW how the army killed herders and other fleeing civilians, and burned homes, property and food stocks (HRW, 3 October 2007). Reuters also

reported that the burning of villages was forcing locals to flee to the bush where their basic needs were unmet (Reuters, 4 September 2007).

Similar allegations of the army committing human rights violations against the civilian population in the Somali Region were also documented by Amnesty International, the US Department of State and Genocide Watch (AI, 28 May 2009; US-DoS, 25 February 2009; Al-Jazeera, 9 August 2009).

Satellite images have backed up reports that the Ethiopian army has burnt towns and villages in Somali Region. The American Association for the Advancement of Science says the images confirm the HRW report and show the army systematically ill-treating civilians in their counter-insurgency campaign (BBC, 12 June 2008).

Gender-based violence is also said to be widespread in Somali region, which is reportedly openly countenanced by the army. Several witnesses have reported that they were gang-raped to the point of unconsciousness by soldiers (Al-Jazeera, 9 August 2009; HRW, June 2008; Reuters, 27 February 2008).

In the February 2009 conflict between the Garre-Somali and the Oromiya-Boran, 300 lives were lost. The BBC reported that many of the displaced had had their villages destroyed and their property stolen (BBC, 13 March 2009).

Landmines continue to hamper the free movement of people in conflict areas. Ethiopia is one of the most heavily-mined countries in Africa. A Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) survey found that 1.9

million people were at risk and identified almost 1,500 communities affected by landmines (Afrol News, 15 April 2009).

Humanitarian access

The activities of aid workers have been severely restricted in regions such as Somali. Humanitarian agencies have since 2008 been granted permission to deliver food but the military escorts still hinder full access (Daily Telegraph, 17 October 2008; BBC News, 19 September 2008; The Times, 18 September 2008). The army has maintained control over humanitarian aid by accompanying convoys, and determining whether it is safe for a delivery to go ahead. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been denied access to Somali Region, and has called on the government to immediately allow its teams to provide assistance to people in the region who are facing an increasingly desperate situation (MSF, 4 September 2007). In July 2008, the Swiss arm of MSF halted its operations in the Region, due to the obstacles put in its way. According to the organisation's statement: "The authorities' attitude towards humanitarian organisations has translated into recurrent arrests of MSF Switzerland staff without charge or explanation… Despite continuous attempts to improve the working relations with authorities, our organisation can only regret the absence of any room to bring independent and impartial assistance." (IRIN, 10 July 2008)

Insecurity in some parts of the country has also hindered aid delivery. In September 2008, two aid workers working for an international organisation were kidnapped by gunmen in Somali Region (BBC, 23 September 2008).

National and international responses

The absence of political effort to resolve internal conflicts and the continuing border dispute with Eritrea presents an ongoing serious risk of renewed conflict in the Horn of Africa, with potential for large-scale displacement and severe humanitarian consequences. At a recent joint meeting between the House of the Federation and representatives of all nine regional governments in Benishangul-Gumuz Region, regional governments accused the federal authorities of not doing enough to help them contain conflicts in the regions (The Reporter, 15 August 2009).

The government's strong control of humanitarian response mechanisms has left many of the disasters either unreported or played down. Responses have been fragmented, inadequate, late, and have left affected populations in an even worse situation (interview in Geneva, November 2008). For example, government food distribution policies have reportedly prevented assistance reaching people in need (AI, 2009); The Telegraph, 17 October 2008; BBC News, 19 September 2008; The Times, 18 September 2008, IRIN, 10 July 2008).

If the government does not improve humanitarian access, affected IDPs and other vulnerable people will continue to face a protection and humanitarian crisis (ICG, 17 June 2008). USAID reported in March 2008 that "literally hundreds of areas… have neither been assessed nor received any food assistance", with "populations terrorised by the inability to access food" (The Times, 18 September 2008). The British Channel 4 reported that the army had withheld food from

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villages in Somali Region as part of a "scorched earth" policy against the ONLF (BBC, 19 September 2008; The Times, 18 September 2008). Before the British Minister for International Development toured a hospital in the town of Kebri Dehar during a visit to Somali Region in October 2008, local officials forced starving infants out of the emergency ward and on to the street (The Telegraph, 17 October 2008).

There is no dedicated government agency or office or a focal point that is known to be dealing with conflict-induced displacement. In August 2008, the government disbanded the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency (DPPA) whose responsibilities were to be to anticipate and prevent disasters and build local capacities to do so as well and transferred its mandate to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Ministry officials now charged with disaster risk management (DRM) anticipate the increased decentralisation of these DRM responsibilities. A proposed policy has called for the mainstreaming of disaster risk management throughout government and greatly strengthened disaster management capacity at the highest levels of government. Debates continue within the government regarding the policy and it is unclear if or when it will be adopted and to what degree this will deal with conflict-induced displacement (ODI, June 2009).

Government line ministries normally help UN agencies disburse food and sanitation assistance (OCHA Humanitarian Bulletin, 10 August 2009). In July 2009, the UN disbursed some $6 million towards helping the Ethiopian government help contain the rising challenges of food insecurity, malnutrition, and ensure health care and water and sanitation support, mostly in displacement-affected areas of Somali, Oromiya, and SNNPR (IRIN, 27 July 2009).

In August 2009, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) recommended to the government "to ensure that refugees and other vulnerable persons, such as internally displaced persons, enjoy their rights under national law as well as various international legal instruments to which it is a party…" The Committee further requested the State Party to "provide, in its next periodic report, detailed information on the human rights situation of refugees and internally displaced persons on its territory…" (CERD, 31 August 2009).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online here.

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org .

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