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Migrations in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti and Somalia)

Djibouti

Djibouti's population is estimated to be at 660,000 and is composed mainly of Issas (a Somali clan) and Afars. Most of the land is rocky desert. An estimated 75% of the population lives in Djibouti City.

Before the “voluntary” departure of nearly 100,000 illegal migrants in August 2003, it was very easy to find many economic migrants in the streets of Djibouti; most of them were from Ethiopia, fewer from Somalia, and much less from Eritrea. These “economic migrants” were here to do different kinds of jobs, usually housekeeping, port labor, and other activities not so attractive to the local population.

We must admit that, in the meanwhile, a good number of those who departed “voluntarily” in 2003 have come back because there is still need for their labor and especially because of the fact that this tiny country looks attractive due to the important presence of French and American military bases and the port, which has become the de facto port of Ethiopia. How many are they? It is difficult to say. My impression is that they may number around fifty thousand. They are here mostly illegally. There are also some two hundred people from African French-speaking countries. They are migrating here because of instability at home and also with the hope to move from Djibouti to richer countries.

We must not forget that the Republic of Djibouti is used as a transit country by a good number of foreigners, mainly Ethiopians. They try to pass through Djibouti in order to go to Yemen, other Gulf countries, or even—via Sudan and Libya—to Europe. Three months ago, a large boat capsized and about thirty people drowned; they were mainly Ethiopians. This is for me the peak of an iceberg which reveals that there are potential migrants who want to escape from their poverty and lack of opportunities—mainly in Ethiopia and Somalia—from the other end: the unscrupulous people who take opportunities to enrich themselves at the expense of poor people.

Finally, we should remember that in Djibouti there are two refugee camps, Holl-Holl and Ali-Addeh, with a population of approximately ten thousand people altogether; these people are practically all from the neighboring self-declared “Republic of Somaliland.” It is true that the government is trying to concentrate these refugees into one of the two camps. In Aour-Aoussa there is a Transit Center for “South Somali” refugees (around four thousand) and nearly two hundred Ethiopians. The integration of the refugees is difficult because of the absence of economic and/or agricultural activities and because of a certain climate of intolerance towards refugees.

The Protestant Church of Djibouti had some activities up to a year ago aimed at the refugees, mainly those of Aour-Aoussa. As for the Catholic Church, through Caritas Djibouti, we have assisted, in a special way, the “illegal” migrants during their repatriation in 2003.

Somalia

As you may know, since January 1991 Somalia has not had a functional central government. The country may have approximately ten million inhabitants. The northwestern part declared its “independence” from the rest of a country in total chaos in May 1991 and calls itself the “Republic of Somaliland;” it has a “government” and a certain stability. The northeastern part also has a form of local government, which calls itself the “Somali State of Puntland.”

The most troubled area is central-southern Somalia, which is subdivided into chiefdoms that are often fighting each other. It is the less arid part of the country with two permanent rivers. Unfortunately, it is the most unsafe and insecure part. It is the origin of most refugees and displaced persons.

The internally displaced persons number about 400,000. They live in ex-government-buildings or on lands that are rented to them. Most of them are displaced because of fighting and insecurity. Recently, because of devastating drought, more than 200,000 are moving from the Gedo region towards neighboring Kenya and the Lower Juba region.

Because of the insecurity, there are very few foreign “refugees” in Somalia; UNHCR recognizes five hundred of them. They come mostly from Ethiopia and some also from Rwanda, Burundi, and Chad. Somalia is, however, a transit area for economic migrants from Ethiopia to Yemen and to other Arab countries. Not only they, but also thousands of Somalis try to cross the Gulf of Aden (mainly from around Bosaso) to go to Yemen and from there to other Arab countries; some hope to one-day reach Europe. The crossing of the Gulf has cost the lives of many people and after already having cost them a considerable amount of money. This is a new and horrible trafficking of human beings which is going on, a traffic that cannot be controlled because of the lack of a functional authority in Somalia.

The Somali refugees in neighboring countries, according to UNHCR, number 240,000 and are subdivided in this way: Eritrea 3,600; Djibouti 10,000; Ethiopia 15,000; Yemen 78,000; Kenya 137,000. Perhaps an equal number, if not more, have settled in European and North-American countries, and possibly even in Australia and Pakistan.

The hope for most Somali refugees and internally displaced persons is the rebirth of national institutions with a functional central authority.

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