

# **Demystifying the Afar Diaspora**

## **Background**

Traditionally, the Afar people seldom left their place of birth, leave alone, immigrate to unknown far away countries. The Afars on the Red Sea coast were sea farers from time immemorial one could say, but their voyages were limited to Arabian Peninsula and gulf area.

The first Afar immigrants who left for Western World did so in pursuit of education in the early 1970s, partly to get a chance they missed in their countries of origin where they are marginalized and later to work in booming Gulf States thanks to the oil explorations. The aforementioned groups never settled for good in these countries where they got education and work opportunities. It was during the turbulent years of the late 80's and early 90's when their ancestral land became a war zone and the Afar people became cannon fodder, for first time in Afar history, Afars sought refuge in the Western democracies three continents (North America, Europe and Australia). But, even today compared with other communities the Afars are small in number, arrived recently and are less organized. We will trace the development further in this paper.

As a direct result of this immigration, we have now some active organizations that participate in different development projects in the Afar triangle together with their local partners.

## **The Myth and Reality**

Due to the direct result of repressive regimes' marginalization the last 30 years that made life indispensable for a majority of the Afar people, many Afars, mostly, the young people were forced to flee their birth places. Currently, many of them live in difficult conditions both in their home countries and in refugee camps in the neighbouring countries where their rights to protection is not fully respected. Therefore, a very insignificant number, compared with other ethnic groups sharing colonially inherited countries with them, have managed to come out and settle in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and EU. It is perfectly understandable that the desperate and internationally neglected refugees and those organizations that want to ease their difficult living conditions cry for help from their brethren, and that they believe they are in a better positioned to assist them.

The question is whether the Afar Diaspora is such a force that can provide the help which is expected from them. What is expected of the Afar Diaspora? Do the Afar political parties want them to lobby for their political agenda? Help people to come over to the countries where they live? Send money back home? Help in liberation struggle like the Tamil community? Invest at home countries? Go visit home? Teach their children their culture? Where is home country of the Afar in overseas? But how big is indeed this Diaspora in the first place? Are they aware of what is going on in their former homelands? Are they committed and organized in all countries? How is the communication between organizations in the West that claim to represent the Afar Diaspora?

But first of all what does the term Diaspora mean?

According to Wikipedia, a Diaspora (in Greek “a scattering of seeds”) is the movement or migration of a group of people, such as those sharing a national and/or ethnic identity, away from an established or ancestral homeland; originally, aimed at the Jews’ forced residence outside their country of origin. But today Diaspora means all communities who are settled in another country but with a connection or a relationship to the country of origin. This group must every body have on its side. The group in power in their ancestral homelands and guerrilla groups as well as tolerated opposition groups, all keen to get access to their sympathy and financial resource. We have in recent years seen the bustling activities of the Djibouti and Ethiopian governments to close out the opposition from the Diaspora activities. The Eritrean government attempt to have a firm control over Diaspora goes back to the liberation struggle era. The new homeland political parties and civil society organizations would also like to win hearts of this group. . Political parties want to gain some votes during the general elections and the second group to lobby for a particular issue at a higher level in the new country. The purposeful and well- organized groups have often taken advantage of this opportunity and run their own important issues of concern and gained support for it in return.

If we look at how it looks in the world today for the groups who are settled in various countries to get asylum from persecution or to gain better economic opportunity, we will discover that there are few who succeeded to convince their new home countries to improve the lives of their brethren in their home countries. Globally, the Jewish Diaspora is the most powerful and much has been written recently about the Jewish lobby in USA which dictates the foreign policy of America in favour of the State of Israel. They have power to influence the agenda of international politics of superpowers. The Armenian group is the second powerful group; they succeeded to put the plight of their people highest on the Agenda in different Western countries. The Greeks and Irish lobbies were effective during the Turkish and Greek conflict on Cyprus respectively the Irish

American lobby in support of causes related to Ireland and their own interests in the USA. They in turn followed by the Kurdish group who since the war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq got positive response to their quest concerning the Iraqi part of Kurdistan as well as the right for their language in Turkish Media outlets.

The Tamils from Sri Lanka and recently the Diasporas from Eastern European countries such as Serbia, Macedonia are becoming a voice to reckon with.

On the Africa side, the Ethiopian and Eritrean Diaspora demonstrated their effective abilities to influence the US government in the first place and the European democracies secondly. The Somali group has in recent times made their voice heard and therefore is now part of discussions and conferences organized by UN to get solution to the Somali situation. The Afar Diaspora group is similar with the Somalis when it comes to ethnic solidarity, but they have no structured and organized efforts to be taken seriously by international community.

They are not as strong as some imagine it. In reality the Afar refugees in the West are late comers and are small in number. There is no statistic about the general number of the Afar Diaspora but the number of the Afar living in North America will not exceed one thousand people when you count both adults and children. In Europe one can dare to guess at the double but in New Zealand and Australia, they are not more than two hundred individuals. Our Diaspora is not organized under a single goal even in the countries where they represent one of the major immigrant groups. The majority of them are young people who are not aware of the prevailing situation in their home countries and in addition most of them are struggling with integration into their new homelands.

### **Conclusion remarks**

When we have demystified the strength of our Diaspora and understood what is realistic due to our capacity, can we despite of these weaknesses make a difference both in helping ourselves and those back home. Thanks to our cultural heritage which is our customary law that does not differentiate between an Afar from different countries of origin, we have succeeded to maintain our unity in spite of the policies our governments have adopted over the past 20 years to create difference between us. Eritrea went so far by creating a different alphabet for the Afar script. The modern technology of the internet and the like in combination with people with wide professional skills have the Afars in overseas opportunity to start independent Radio and satellite TV channels, news agencies, etc, to inform and educate both the Diaspora and the people in the Afar triangle on the prevailing situation. It is also possible to develop cultural and

linguistic activities so that the Afars of second generation do not forget their culture and their mother tongue but use them frequently in their daily lives.

But to do this, we have to create organizations in different countries we are living in and coordinate our efforts to meet the challenge ahead. When it has become possible for the Kurds, who are divided into five or more countries with even different languages, to come together under the same Diaspora organization there is no doubt that we also can realize our dream of unity far away from the Afar triangle. Achieving this objective needs to start with demystifying the capacity or capability of the Afar Diaspora and making a realistic assessment of our weakness and strengths.

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