



ICRC

THE ICRC IN ERITREA – UPDATE

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"I can't express my happiness!"



The 29 November 2002 will be remembered as a day of happiness and joy for the 1130 Eritrean former Prisoners of War and 95 Civilian Internees, who were repatriated from Ethiopia to their home country under the auspices of the ICRC. The images show the returnees crossing the border at Mereb bridge (left and right) and the bus convoy in Mendefera, being greeted by the population (centre).

Back home

"I am born again – I will be baptised after 30 days!" said a joyful, exhausted Eritrean civilian. He had just crossed the border at Mereb river, between the towns of Rama (Ethiopia) and Adi Quala (Eritrea), on 29 November 2002. During the border war between the two countries, he had been detained in an Ethiopian internee camp for over 4 years. Many others like him just couldn't express their happiness to be back home, with the perspective to be united with their families soon.

A bystander from Adi Quala who had travelled to Mereb bridge to witness this remarkable day declared: "All of us who are here are

not waiting just for close brothers and sisters, all are the same for us and we are happy to see them again."

A chapter has been closed

Three months before, another 279 former prisoners - Ethiopians this time - had celebrated their release and repatriation. Both Eritrea and Ethiopia had announced their readiness to release the last prisoners visited by the ICRC during a visit by ICRC's President, Jakob Kellenberger, in August. Both states fulfilled hereby their obligations under the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which state that Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees must be released after the hostilities

come to an end. The same conventions give the ICRC the right to visit persons detained in relation to an international conflict. During their detention, the prisoners are allowed to contact their families through Red Cross Messages. ICRC delegates assess their treatment and detention conditions and urge the authorities through confidential talks to make improvements, if needed. Currently, ICRC delegates continue to visit Ethiopian civilian detainees in Eritrea and Eritrean civilians detained in Ethiopia – to ensure good treatment and proper detention conditions and to help them to contact their families through Red Cross Messages.

After 4 years Hager joins her family again



Through the ICRC family reunion programme, 12 year-old Hager (3rd from the left) has joined her family in Eritrea, after having been separated since May 1998. More than 200 children, sick and elderly persons have been reunited with their families in Eritrea and Ethiopia since the end of 1998.

When Hager was seven years old, she was visiting her grandparents in a village in Tigray (Ethiopia). In May 1998, her family had to leave the country and arrived in Eritrea, leaving Hager behind.

Now, nearly five years later, Hager can smile again together with her parents and her 8 brothers and sisters. She was included in the ICRC family reunion programme, and by end of December 2002, ICRC delegates brought her all the way from Tigray through the border at Mereb bridge to the Sheleb camp for displaced persons in Gash Barka, where her family lives now.

Since the end of 1998, more than 200 children, sick and elderly persons have benefited from the ICRC reunion programme. Often they are brought to their

country of origin by air via Sanaa; others go by land and cross the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia at Mereb bridge, between Adi Quala (Eritrea) and Rama (Ethiopia).

Helping to cross the border

Together with the Eritrean and Ethiopian authorities, the ICRC facilitates also the repatriation of all those Eritrean and Ethiopian

nationals who want to return to their home country. This programme, called "Safe Passage Operation", is conducted through the Mereb bridge under the auspices of the ICRC. Volunteers from the Ethiopian Red Cross and from the Red Cross Society of Eritrea provide water and food during the repatriations. In 2002, more than 1800 Eritreans and Ethiopians have been repatriated.

Anxious for news? Send a Red Cross message!

All over the world and since more than 100 years, Red Cross messages connect people separated by conflicts. Currently, more than 2000 such letters are sent monthly between Ethiopia and Eritrea through the Red Cross network.



Bishuka's inhabitants now have their own water



No need to walk to the river: new public fountain in Bishuka

Tsehaitu is a mother of six children living in Bishuka, Gash Barka. The widow in her forties is earning the family's expenses by producing the local beer Suwa. She is glad that she can collect the daily ten jerrycans of fresh water close to her house, at a public fountain in Bishuka. The Water and Habitat department of the ICRC Eritrea has installed a new water supply system for the 5000 inhabitants of Bishuka area: a submersible pump takes the water from a well,

pumps it through a 4 kilometer pipeline to a reservoir on a hill, and another pipeline brings the water to three public fountains in the town. In December, the ICRC handed over the project to the local authorities.

In order to make it sustainable, the beneficiaries pay 25 cents per jerrycan. The money covers the diesel needed to run the pump, maintenance costs as well as the salaries of the pump operator and 3 employees working at the fountains.

The ICRC Water and Habitat department is also repairing hand-pumps, which provide water for residents and displaced people living in or near war-affected border regions. During the last four months, 9 hand-pumps have been fixed in Zoba Debub and 8 more in Zoba Gash Barka.

Relief items for IDPs

From September to December 2002, the ICRC department of Economic Security has continued to provide relief items to people affected by the past war.

Around 60'000 internal displaced persons (IDPs) living in camps, 77 new displaced families in Monoxito (Debub), some 400 families who have returned to their villages around Tsorona (Debub), and 271 IDP families which were resettled in Debai Sima (Southern Red Sea) have benefited from the program. Depending on their needs, they have been given items like tents, plastic sheets, blankets, kitchen sets, jerrycans, toilet soap and laundry soap.

Health centre in Tokombia renovated

The ICRC continues to renovate health facilities damaged during the conflict of 1998-2000. In Gash Barka, the Tokombia Health Centre (photo) got new windows and doors, the roof was fixed, walls and ceilings were painted. Works for the Shilalo Health Station are ongoing. In January 2003, the ICRC and the Ministry of Health signed a Memorandum of Understanding to rehabilitate the Shambuko Health Centre.



"Are we allowed to shoot or not?"



The Ministry of Defence invited the ICRC in November 2002 to give a 4 days basic training course on the Law of Armed Conflict to 20 officers of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). The course was held in Embatkala and closed by the Minister of Defence, General Sibhat Efreem (picture in the centre).

The case study is tricky. Sergeant Haile has disabled an enemy tank. According to International Humanitarian Law, is he allowed to shoot at the tank crew, who is trying to flee on foot?

The officers of the Eritrean Defence Forces hesitate. During the previous days, they have learned that they should not attack a combatant who is out of combat. But an enemy who flees is still combating – unless he surrenders. "The course was very good – I suggest every soldier should take it!", said

one officer after the closure of the course, which had been held in the EDF center in Embatkala from 5 to 8 November 2002.

From the heart to the mind

It has been the first-ever course on the law of armed conflict given by the ICRC to members of the armed forces in Eritrea. In 2003 more such courses are planned. The idea is to train the EDF trainers, who shall pass the learned lessons to

their soldiers during the daily military trainings.

The participants stressed that they had already applied many humanitarian rules, like the correct treatment of prisoners of war, before having studied the Geneva Conventions, where the basic rules of war are written. But the course has helped them to "carry the knowledge about the limits in warfare from our hearts to our minds", as a high-ranking officer from the Sawa training center put it.

The Red Cross Society of Eritrea strengthens its volunteer network

In Eritrea, there is no shortage of enthusiastic volunteers who are ready to devote their time for humanitarian aid work within the Red Cross Society of Eritrea (RCSE). Since September 2002, the ICRC Cooperation department is helping the RCSE to strengthen its volunteer network through the build-up of an adequate structure and training. The RCSE will create "Red Cross Action Teams" which consist of trained, well equipped, highly motivated non-paid volunteers, who are regularly available for different types of RCSE activities, like Emergency Preparedness & Response, First Aid, Tracing, Dissemination, etc.



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