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7 April 2017

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Djibouti: Treatment of the Afar by society and the authorities, including treatment of Afar army members (2010-March 2017)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Treatment of the Afar by Society

In a document prepared in 2013 for Djibouti, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee states the following about minorities in Djibouti:

[UN English version]

[There is a] perception that the Afar minority suffers marginalization in comparison to the Issas, including in relation to employment and job advancement, participation in the ruling party, the civil service and security service as well as in business. (UN 29 Apr. 2013, para. 23)

Similarly, according to a report published in 2016 by Freedom House, "[m]inority ethnic groups and clans suffer discrimination that contributes to their social and economic marginalization" (Freedom House 10 May 2016). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a teacher in France and author of several books on Djibouti, including on the Afar and Djibouti politics, stated that [translation] "since 2010, the situation of the Afar in the Republic of Djibouti can be summarized by one phrase: the deterioration of their political, economic and social situation" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). The same source also stated that [translation] "in the capital and predominantly-Afar major cities, there is massive unemployment impacting more dramatically the non-Issas" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). The teacher wrote that [translation] "people in the Afar regions (Tadjoura, Dikhil and Obock) face an unemployment rate of nearly 90 percent" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017).

In *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016*, the United States (US) Department of State indicates the following about Djibouti:

The governing coalition included all of the country's major clan and ethnic groups, with minority groups also represented in senior positions. Nonetheless, there continued to be discrimination on the basis of ethnicity in employment and job advancement Somali Issas, the majority ethnic group, controlled the ruling party and dominated the civil service and security services, and the government marginalized the minority Afar peoples. Discrimination based on ethnicity and clan affiliation remained a factor in business and politics. (US 3 Mar. 2017, 24)

Country Reports 2014 states that some Afars continued to indicate that they were not as well represented at lower government levels (US 25 June 2015). Similarly, according to a European Parliament document published in 2011 [1], in Djibouti, [EU English version] "within government, the Afars are severely under-represented" (EU 18 Jan. 2011). According to the teacher, [translation] "belonging to the Afar ethnicity is a serious handicap if you seek employment in the [Djibouti] public service such as a sweeper, labourer, soldier,

police officer, gendarme, public servant" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). That same source stated that [translation] "Afar ministers are half as numerous as their Issa counterparts" and they "carry out symbolic powers in their administration" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). However, *Country Reports 2016* reports that, in Djibouti, 12 ministers were of the Afar minority group (US 3 Mar. 2017, 24). According to the website of the Djibouti government's Secretariat General, the Djibouti government is made up of one prime minister, eighteen ministers, three delegated ministers and two secretaries of state (Djibouti n.d.).

2. Treatment of the Afar by the Authorities

A document on Djibouti prepared in 2013 by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that [UN English version] "[t]he Committee regrets that the Somali and Afar languages have no legal status in the State party and that they have still not been incorporated in school curricula" (UN 30 Dec. 2013, para. 37). The teacher wrote that [translation] "radio and television reserve ongoing time slots for Somali language and culture, while the Afar language is poorly broadcasted and receives meager state funding" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). However, an article published by the Djibouti daily *La Nation* reports that during the festivities organized on 11 April 2015 in Samara, Ethiopia, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of transcribing the Afar language, Djibouti Prime Minister Abdoukader Kamil Mohamed [translation] "promised that the Republic of Djibouti would support efforts to promote the Afar language" (*La Nation* 13 Apr. 2015). According to another article published by the same source, the prime minister also presided over the anniversary's celebration ceremony held on 23 February 2015 at Djibouti's People's Palace (*La Nation* 24 Feb. 2015).

According to *Country Reports 2015*, the Afar minority was "marginalized" by the government (US 13 Apr. 2016, 23). Similarly, an article published in 2013 by *Alwihda*, an online newspaper on African news (*Alwihda* 15 Feb. 2009), states that, in Djibouti, [translation] "the regime has distinguished itself by a policy to marginalize the Afar and by extreme political repression and repression through trade unions" (*Alwihda* 11 July 2013).

The document published by the European Parliament in 2011 states that [EU English version] "[a] food blockade in the Obock district, populated largely by Afars, has been implemented" while "almost all food in Djibouti is imported" (EU 18 Jan. 2011). An article published in 2014 by *Alwihda* reports that the people in Obock have been subjected to [translation] "an unprecedented curfew and a complete blockade ... since 1991 and maintained today by the dictatorial regime of Guelleh [president of Djibouti]" (*Alwihda* 20 Oct. 2014). With respect to the blockade, that same source states that the Afar in northern and south-western Djibouti suffer, and their poverty is intensified by the lack of food, health care, potable water and education (*Alwihda* 20 Oct. 2014). Similarly, the French Association of Friendship and Solidarity with the People of Africa (Association française d'amitié et de solidarité avec les peuples d'Afrique, AFASPA), an association that works to [translation] "raise awareness of the current problems in Africa through conferences, exhibitions and a quarterly review" (Eaubonne n.d.), published on its website a news release from Montreuil on 22 April 2015 by the Observatory for the Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti (Observatoire pour le respect des droits humains à Djibouti, ORDHD) [3], demanding [translation] "that the food and sanitary blockade be removed" in the northern part of the country (AFASPA 24 Apr. 2015). According to a proposed resolution of the European Parliament in 2016, a [translation] "food, economic and sanitary blockade conducted by the authorities [occurred in Djibouti] in the regions of Obock, Tadjoural and Diklil" (UE 10 May 2016, para. 8).

The teacher stated the following about the situation of the Afar:

[translation]

The Afar are not automatically registered with the state. It is impossible to obtain a national identity card without the support of a Member of Parliament or senior official in the region. The elector's cards are strictly controlled. At the presidential election, the Issa soldiers vote in Tadjoura and Obock, in place of the local population. (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

However, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a representative of the Djibouti Observatory for the Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights (Observatoire djiboutien pour la promotion de la démocratie et des droits humains, ODDH), a local NGO, stated that there has been no specific treatment of the Afar in Djibouti since 2010 (ODDH 3 Apr. 2017). That same source explained the following:

[translation]

Most Djiboutians are subjected to injustice daily

Furthermore, regardless of their membership in a community or tribe, Djiboutians who fight for dignity, human rights and the advent of a true democracy, are defeated by the ruling power. (ODDH 3 Apr. 2017)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.1. Treatment of the Afar by the Security Forces

In a letter written in 2015 for the president of Djibouti, the president of the AFASPA stated the following:

[translation]

Our organization was informed of the new cycle of arbitrary arrests and various violations of human rights perpetrated by the soldiers and police forces of Djibouti for ethnic, tribal and familial reasons, against people whose only offence is that they are more or less connected to members of the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (Front pour la restauration de l'unité et de la démocratie, FRUD) [political-military movement in Djibouti (*I'Humanité* 29 Apr. 2015)].

This wave of arrests began on October 3 in Lac Assal and continued to Tadjourah, Balho, Guirori; it extended ... to the Obock district to reach Djibouti. On 14 October 2015, the Djibouti Human Rights League (la Ligue djiboutienne des droits de l'homme) had 19 people detained at the RDS center [Research and Documentation Section (Section de la recherche et documentation)] of the gendarmerie where torture is still practiced. Women do not escape the repression. About 15 women were also arrested. (AFASPA 22 Oct. 2015)

Similarly, an article published in 2015 by Mondeafrique, a website that provides [translation] "analyses and investigations into the political and economic situation of the countries in Maghreb and in Francophone Africa" (Mondeafrique n.d.), states that the leader of the FRUD, Mohamed Kadami, stated the following in an interview: [translation] "A number of notable Afars, including Ado Mohamed and Badou Godar Badoul, were arrested at the beginning of October because they failed to adhere to the project under the fourth term [of the president]" (Mondeafrique 5 Nov. 2015). The article published in 2014 by *Alwihda* states that the [translation] "arbitrary arrests are increasing, and there were dozens of them" in the Obock region (*Alwihda* 20 Oct. 2014). According to the same source, a number of cases of arbitrary arrest [translation] "still remain unknown out of fear of reprisals" (*Alwihda* 20 Oct. 2014).

A report published in 2013 by the UN Human Rights Council [2] states that [UN English version] "one of the principal features of the repressive policy pursued by the authorities in Djibouti is the systematic torture of persons who have been arrested," including Afar civilians (UN 7 Feb. 2013, para. 4). That same source reports:

[UN English version]

Civilians are tortured with impunity at military barracks in Tadjoura, in the districts of Galela, Mablās, Assageilla, Adaylou and in Tadjoura city, in Margoita and in Obock, in the districts of Waddi, Alayli Dadda, Doumeira and in Obock city, during the frequent sweeps made by the Djibouti National Army (AND). Victims are targeted for allegedly being sympathizers of the Front pour la restauration de l'unité et la démocratie (Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy) (FRUD), for being related to members of FRUD, or simply for belonging to the Afar community. They can be detained in custody for several months without any legal remedy. (UN 7 Feb. 2013, para. 5)

Similarly, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a representative of the FRUD stated, with respect to the Afar situation, that [translation] "civilians [in the districts of Tadjourah, Obock and Dikhil, where the FRUD is still present], considered to support the FRUD, are very often arrested and tortured, and some face extrajudicial execution" (FRUD 4 Apr. 2017). That same source explained that [translation] "civilians who are arrested are tortured ... in military barracks where they are detained for at least two months" (FRUD 4 Apr. 2017). According to *Country Reports 2016*, although the constitution and law in Djibouti prohibit torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, reports indicate that security forces "beat and tortured detainees" (US 3 Mar. 2017, 2). According to a news release from the FRUD in Geneva on 5 September 2016 and published on the website of the AFASPA, [translation] "the army has a death squad made up of soldiers chosen for their fidelity to the president, who torture and kill Afar civilians" (AFASPA 6 Sept. 2016). According to the teacher, [translation] "violence against civilian Afars has become a common practice because every year two or three nomad Afars are killed by Djibouti soldiers operating in the backcountry, claiming to fight the armed front" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). An article published in 2016 by the ORDHD states that two Afar shepherds, Ali Oumar Mohamed and Houmed Kamil Mohamed, were [translation] "tortured to death by the Djibouti army" (ORDHD 3 Sept. 2016). In the letter to the Djibouti president, the president of the AFASPA wrote that [translation] "on 23 August 2015, a young Afar, Ali Mohamed Haïssama, was executed by law enforcement near Lac Assal ..., without any investigation" (AFASPA 22 Oct. 2015).

2.1.1 Treatment of Women Afars by Security Forces

The report published in 2013 by the UN Human Rights Council reports that:

[UN English version]

rapes of Afar women by Government troops in the northern and south-western regions ... started in September 1993 ... [and] are the result of a high-level political decision. There is evidence of serial rapes of Afar women by government troops. The objective of these systematic rapes is to destroy ethnic identity. The women are raped by a number of soldiers in order to mark them for life and to break and humiliate them. Some girls have been permanently disabled as a result of these violent incidents. They are often raped in front of their parents and husbands in order to wreck any attempt to rebuild the family. (UN 7 Feb. 2013, para. 10)

In a blog post published in 2016 by Médiapart, [translation] "a digital, independent and participatory news medium" (Médiapart n.d.), it is written that [translation] "the rapists assault Afar women with impunity, and this violence is akin to government directives in which the state encourages other ethnicities to settle on Afar land and enter into conflict with them" (Médiapart 3 Apr. 2016). According to the article published by *Alwihda* in 2013, [translation] "many testimonials attest to serial rape of Afar women by the government army" (*Alwihda* 11 July 2013). That same source states that [translation] "this systematic rape aims to destroy community identity" (*Alwihda* 11 July 2013). An article published in 2016 on the TV5 website states:

[translation]

To date, the "Committee of Djibouti Women Against Rape and Impunity" (Comité des femmes djiboutiennes contre les viols et l'impunité) has received 246 testimonials of rape, while only about 20 complaints have been registered by the Djibouti government.

The spokesperson for the committee also stated that doctors do not want to acknowledge the rape: "at the very most, they agree to report beatings and injuries to avoid seeing their clinic shut down by the government." (TV5 31 Mar. 2016)

That same source states that women cannot report rape in their country because [translation] "the Djibouti authority supports its own soldiers" (TV5 31 Mar. 2016). Similarly, the article published in 2013 by *Alwihda* reports that [translation] "these complaints [filed by women victims of rape and] involving soldiers, are classified as discontinued by Djibouti courts and go nowhere in the Republic of Djibouti" (*Alwihda* 11 July 2013).

That same source states that in 2012 and the first quarter of 2013, [translation] "26 cases of rape were reported to the Committee of Djibouti Women Against Rape and Impunity, in Adaylou, Margoita, Syaru, Galela (district of Tadjourah), Mabla, Waddi, Alaylou (district of Obock)" (*Alwihda* 11 July. 2013). The article published in 2014 by *Alwihda* states that [translation] "soldiers indulge in rape and torture especially in Andollie, Dadatto, Adgeno and Wadi, where movement is practically prohibited and there is no road access" (*Alwihda* 20 Oct. 2014). According to the news release of the FRUD, published in 2016 on the website of the AFASPA, soldiers rape women [translation] "in particular in the Margoita, Syarou, Garabtissan triangle, as well as in Mabras and Goda" (AFASPA 6 Sept. 2016).

2.2 Treatment of Afar Army Members

Information on the treatment of Afars in the army was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to *Country Reports 2016*, the majority ethnic group, the Somali Issas, "dominated the civil service and security services" in Djibouti (US 3 Mar. 2017, 24). That same source states that discrimination based on ethnicity in employment and job advancement continues in Djibouti (US 3 Mar. 2017, 24).

The teacher explained that army corps are enlisted exclusively based on clan identity; for example, the presidential guard is made up of several hundred individuals, none of whom are Afars (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). That same source referred to an [translation] "extreme anti-Afar policy" in the "military public service" (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017). Similarly, the representative of the FRUD reported that [translation] "the Djibouti army is clan-based and is where discrimination against the Afar is the most glaring" (FRUD 4 Apr. 2017).

The teacher stated the following about Afar army members:

[translation]

Early termination is practiced against [Afar] soldiers who demonstrate particular skills that could be used against the regime if these officers are promoted.

Ethnic cleansing has reduced their workforce from over 50 percent to 20 percent today.

Their officers (lieutenants, captains, commanders) [are] declining in number compared with the Issa [and] have no power within their commanding corps.

Afar soldiers have not received promotions for several decades, while their counterparts are shooting ahead

... .

...

After trying out life in the overly Somali barracks, young Afar recruits tend to desert. (Teacher 29 Mar. 2017)

Similarly, the representative of the FRUD stated that Afar soldiers describe the situation as one in which there is [translation] "no advancement" (FRUD 4 Apr. 2017). According to that same source, [translation] "there were ... several executions of recalcitrant soldiers, and several Afar soldiers joined the FRUD (one of the leaders of the FRUD's army wing is a former second lieutenant of the army (Assa Abdo)" (FRUD 4 Apr. 2017). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The document contains information related to a question asked of the European Commission in 2010 by former Member of the European Parliament Stéphane Le Foll.

[2] The report is a summary of the submissions of five stakeholders - Article 19, Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, Reporters without Borders, Reprieve and Association femmes solidaires - and [UN English version] "does not contain any opinions, views or suggestions on the part of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, nor any judgement or determination in relation to specific claims" (UN 7 Feb. 2013, 1, 7).

[3] [translation] "The Observatory for the Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti (Observatoire pour le respect des droits humains à Djibouti), created in France in February 2002, was born of the Committee for the Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti (Comité pour le respect des droits de l'homme à Djibouti). It brings together citizens from Europe and Djibouti" (Lesnouvelles.org 20 Apr. 2010).>

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Internet sites, including: *Afriques en lutte*; Amnesty International; Association femmes solidaires; BBC; Factiva; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Human Rights Watch; *Le Monde*; Radio France internationale; United Nations – Refworld.

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