Afar

Profile

Afar live in adjacent parts of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. These Hamitic people are Muslim. They speak Afar and Arabic and are pastoral nomads.

Historical context

Afers have been most affected by the creation of an independent Eritrea. At the time of its inception, the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) leader, Ali Mirah Anfere, declared that the ALF's goal would be to establish an independent Islamic state for Afars. Its boundaries were to be decided on the basis of Afar ethnic habitation, including the Awash river basin and neighbouring territories, and the southern part of Eritrea. Mengistu's creation of an autonomous province of Assab did nothing to settle the Afar issue, since the most fertile land in the Awash valley remained in Amhara control. The ALF has an uneasy relationship with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The latter organized a seminar of the Afar Democratic Union in 1990, suggesting it was trying to build an alternative to the ALF. Under the 1994 Constitution, Afar became one of Ethiopia's nine regional states.

A substantial part of Afar reluctance to accept an independent Eritrea is a result of their unwillingness to see their people divided by state boundaries. During the border war with Eritrea, Afar people on both sides of the border were caught in the middle. The two states encouraged Afar rebel movements in the other: Ethiopia supporting the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union in Eritrea, and Eritrea supporting the ALF and the Afar People's Democratic Organization in Ethiopia.

The Afar region has been particularly susceptible to drought. In 2002, a failure of seasonal rains decimated herds and led to a spike in malnutrition rates. The government in Addis Ababa was slow to respond with assistance. Increased competition for water and grazing land led to increased conflict among pastoralist peoples in the region: the Afar, Isa, Kerreyu and Ittu.

Current issues

In early 2005, drought again struck the Afar region. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned that repeated droughts were decimating the livelihood of Afar pastoralists. With poor infrastructure, few schools and little access to health care, the Afar remain one of the most marginalized peoples of Ethiopia.