

## Afar

### Profile

The coastal lowlands of Eritrea, a northward extension of the Rift Valley, are blisteringly hot, support no plant life and are inhabited by Afar, also known as Danakils. These Hamitic people are Muslim. They speak Afar and Arabic and are pastoral nomads.

### Historical context

In the early 1970s these nomads suffered greatly from famine. In this arid semi-wilderness they had to use pasture over a wide area in order to support their herds. In previous times of drought, they had to move to other areas, which included the traditional regions of the Tcheffa Valley, and pastures along the inland delta of the Awash River.

But during the 1960s the Tcheffa Valley became the location of commercial sorghum farms, and large cotton plantations were developed along the Awash. Not only were 20,000 Afar pastoralists displaced by irrigated land, but when drought hit they were unable to move to their traditional grazing lands. Their mobility has been restricted by the flow of weaponry to their nomadic competitors the Issas (ethnic Somalis) and clashes over wells.

Afar leaders were highly critical of the EPLF, although they were in favour of the freedom enjoyed by Danakalia's Afar regional assembly, and Eritrea's promise to provide humanitarian and medical support to the Afar Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et la Democratie (FRUD) in Djibouti. In 1995, to the chagrin of the Afar, the government reduced the number of provinces to increase national cohesion. 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 Afar Liberation Front and Afar Peoples Democratic Organization in Ethiopia.

### Current issues

Droughts in recent years have put the pastoralist Afar community at risk of hunger and disease.