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Ethiopia and Eritrea: Possibility of repatriation of Ethiopian and Eritrean civilians to their homelands (2006)

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This Response to Information Request contains information on the possibility of repatriation of Ethiopians in Eritrea and of Eritreans in Ethiopia. It does not contain information concerning the possibility of repatriation of Ethiopians and Eritreans seeking to return home from a third country.

Throughout 2006 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) continued to assist in repatriating both Ethiopian and Eritrean civilians to their respective countries (*The Daily Monitor* 18 July 2006). The ICRC indicated that it also facilitated the repatriation of minors, seniors and the sick to their homeland upon their request (1 June 2006b, 84). According to a report on its activities to the United Nations (UN) Security Council by the UN Secretary-General, the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) monitored the repatriation process (UN 3 Jan. 2006, para. 38). The UN Secretary-General noted that "persons of Ethiopian origin continue to face discriminatory practices in Eritrea, including the demand for payment or high 'repatriation clearance fees'"(ibid.). He further noted that persons of Eritrean extraction were reportedly detained prior to their repatriation (ibid.). In several of his reports to the UN Security Council, the Secretary-General reiterated appeals to the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea "to ensure that the repatriations remain voluntary and that they are carried out in a proper and dignified manner" (ibid.; ibid. 6 Mar. 2006, para. 24; ibid. 19 Sept. 2006, para. 27).

According to an UNMEE activity report, one of its human rights officers participated in the 20 January 2006 ICRC-led repatriation of 172 Ethiopians from Eritrea to Ethiopia, and 11 Eritreans from Ethiopia to Eritrea (ibid. 26 Jan. 2006). UNMEE indicated that the operation was a success and that it would conduct follow-up interviews with the Ethiopian civilians (ibid.). In addition to the January repatriation, the ICRC facilitated repatriations of Ethiopians and Eritreans over the course of the year 2006 as follows:

May 2006: 164 Ethiopians and 7 Eritreans (ICRC 14 Apr. 2006)

June 2006: 47 Eritreans (ibid. 4 July 2006)

July 2006: 232 Ethiopians and 5 Eritreans (*The Daily Monitor* 18 July 2006)

October 2006: 13 Ethiopians and 420 Eritreans (ICRC 20 Oct. 2006)

Returnees were met by local ICRC representatives and put in the care of the receiving government (*ibid.*). In its October 2006 *Operational Guidance Note on Eritrea*, the United Kingdom (UK) Home Office writes that all returns "are now voluntary and administered by the ICRC" (UK 27 Oct. 2006, 11).

The total number of voluntary repatriations facilitated by the ICRC in 2005 was between 848 and 979 persons from Eritrea to Ethiopia, and between 182 and 192 from Ethiopia to Eritrea (ICRC 1 June 2006a, 81; *ibid.* 1 June 2006b, 85; US 8 Mar. 2006a, Sec. 1.d; *ibid.* 8 Mar 2006b, Sec. 1.d). The ICRC also reunited 41 persons with their relatives in Ethiopia and 55 persons with their relatives in Eritrea (ICRC 1 June 2006a, 81). It indicated that in 2005 there was a decline in the number of persons seeking repatriation to Eritrea, owing in part to a 2004 Ethiopian law addressing the status of Eritreans (ICRC 1 June 2006b, 86). For more information on this law, consult the May 2006 report produced by WriteNet, a network of experts on human rights and migration. Called *Ethiopia: A Sociopolitical Assessment*, it was commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

At a February 2006 Ministerial Conference on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons, the Eritrean Minister of Labor and Human Welfare noted that his government had, in collaboration with UNHCR, repatriated 341,000 Eritreans to Eritrea (IGAD and UNHCR 21 Feb. 2006, para. 27). The Minister indicated that this program would continue until a cessation of status for Eritrean refugees comes into effect, but did not indicate when this might take place (*ibid.*). At the same conference, a representative of the Ethiopian government made no reference to the repatriation of either Eritreans or Ethiopians, but did indicate that Ethiopia had received many Eritrean refugees and planned to open another refugee camp to accommodate them (*ibid.*, para. 34).

In its *Global Report 2005*, the UNHCR notes that while the agency provided 120,000 returnees to Eritrea with assistance, the "need remained high" with respect to returnees' ability to secure their livelihoods (UN 2006, 177, 180). An October 2006 WriteNet report on Eritrea commissioned by the UNHCR notes that Eritreans living in other countries "are afraid to go back for fear of imprisonment" (WriteNet 1 Oct. 2006). The report indicates that the people who are afraid to return are those who are "vulnerable to human rights violations in Eritrea," in particular, members of the independent media, minority faiths, and political opponents of the government of Eritrea (WriteNet 1 Oct. 2006, 14; see also AI Mar. 2004).

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 additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Crisis Group (ICG), United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

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