



# The Afar Forum Conference

Press Release, Brussels 17-19 October, 2008

The Afar people in the Three Horn of Africa States of Ethiopia , Eritrea and Djibouti are not only facing overwhelming challenges, but also are in the core of interlocking conflicts between the three states and among the nationalities in the region. They are systematically excluded from decision making, have an inadequate system for delivering health care, a poor uptake of education, ruthless exploration of natural resources, recurrent drought and famine, repeated border wars, and many other socio-economic injustices in the three states. It was against this deplorable background that the Afar Forum held its annual conference in Brussels on 17-19<sup>th</sup> October, 2009.

The conference participants included Afars from USA, Canada, Europe; Political organizations: Afar Liberation Front (ALF), ARD, FRUD, PDD, PRD RSADO, and Uguta. Additionally, various NGOs as well as other Ethiopian political and civic organisations, and many political analysts of the Horn of Africa were present. Various solidarity messages were received wishing the conference success.

The focus of this years' conference was the role of Afars Diaspora in illuminating the way forward and mitigate the impact of all those circumstances on our people. The objective of the conference was to discuss and address the range of situations and complex issues affecting Afars in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

In the **Afar Region of Ethiopia** our concern is multifaceted as well as the challenges. A major issue is the establishment of state farms along the Awash Valley. In contravention to the provisions of the Ethiopian Constitution (Art.40.5) that stipulates that "the Ethiopian pastoralists has the right not to be displaced from their own grazing lands". The state has seized a vast area of grazing land belonging to the Afars, a situation which is emulated in Afdera Salt Lake Valley, with huge state backed investment and yet again in the looming potash prospecting licences in Dallol. These investments exclude and displace the Afar population from land which is theirs, without any compensation whatsoever.

Of these large-scale projects the development of a sugar plantation is the most threatening and instils us with grave concern. This concern arises from the devastating consequences of the previous large-scale sugar project (Tandaho), which resulted in starvation and death of many Afars in the area. In principle we are not against such development, either by federal, regional government or private firms, as such projects may attract further investment, have the potential to become sources of revenue and will provide opportunities for employment, which would benefit the country. However we have serious concerns about the likely impact of such large-scale projects on the socio-ecology system of the area, most notably in the absence of any social and environmental impact studies.

Given the dire impact on Afars of previous projects of this kind, the conference demands further consultation and proper socio-ecology studies to be undertaken to examine all aspects of the project, including the likely future impact on the demography of the area including Afar herdsman and their communities.

The conference discussed the conflict between the Afars and their neighbouring nationalities; particularly the chronic conflict between Afar and Issa Somalis armed militias, whose recurrent armed incursions has the sole aim of taking away grazing areas of Afar territory. This continues

without gaining sufficient attention from the Ethiopian government. Whilst this conference was in progress the killing of Afars continued in the area and we therefore strongly demand firm action from the Ethiopian government to stop these unnecessary and unlawful killings.

**In Djibouti** the government is tightening its grip on the local population. The political, economic and social situation remains critical, in the country in general, and among the Afar population in particular. Since its independence, Afars in Djibouti are not receiving their share of political power; economic development and has been culturally dominated. The two peace agreements signed in 1994 and in 2001, resulted in failures, by the intransigence of the Djibouti regime. The latest peace agreement between the government and the FRUD-Armé has not been implemented. Therefore, the faction of FRUD which has transformed to a political party (ARD) and negotiated decentralization of power with the regime declared the peace agreement as dead and withdrew from political discussions. These crises are feared to result in another civil war between the regime and the wing of FRUD that refused the two agreements.

**In Eritrea** the Afar situation is daunting, since the government prohibits the operation of national or international organisations. The livelihood of Afars in Eritrea depends on fishery and trade cross the border with Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti. Since the total ban to fish for private persons and the closure of these borders, the Afar population has suffered tremendously. The conference expresses its deep concern about the plight of Afar refugees from Eritrea who are crossing the border in increasing numbers to Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti without adequate support and as a result refugees live in inhuman conditions without national and international assistance for basic necessities.

- We urge and demand that the Ethiopian Authorities reconsider the implementation of the Awash Sugar plantation project until studying thoroughly its grave impact and consequences to the Afar pastoralists in the area.
- We appeal to all Afars in Diaspora to intensify their effort and play a positive role in contributing their share in awareness to critical and deplorable situation of their compatriots and find ways to alleviate the plight of their people the region.
- We invite all the concerned peoples from the region for an open dialogue and peacefully resolve of the conflicts in the Afar area for betterment of all concerned in the region.
- We demand that the states of the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea) resolve their differences in the peaceful manner and work for regional integration
- We appeal directly to the Ethiopian Government to take firm action to stop the recurrent armed incursions by the Issa-Somalis into Afar areas and take resolute steps to resolve the conflict peacefully.
- We appeal to the Eritrean Government to alleviate alarming food crises, to respect free movements of its citizens and to support the Afar fishermen.
- We appeal to the Djibouti Government to implement the power sharing and decentralization agreements it signed with Afar opposition groups and empower the Afar population.
- We appeal to the international community in general and the French authority in particular to assist the Afar civilians fleeing the border war between Djibouti and Eritrea.
- We appeal to UN, AU, EU, Arab League, Minority Rights Group and Human Rights Watch to support the Afar in their struggle for basic human rights democratic rights.

