

US refugee official visits Eritrean, South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia-18 March 2015 (UNHCR)-Ms. Catherine Wiesner, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the United States' Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) recently visited UNHCR's programs in Tigray and Gambella Regional States where more than 350,000 Eritrean and South Sudanese refugees have been accommodated.

In Tigray, she visited the Endabaguna Transit Centre as well as Adi-Harush, Hitsats and Mai-aini refugee camps, home to some 90,000 Eritrean refugees, including a significant number of children who have come alone from Eritrea. She was accompanied by Ato Ayalew Aweke, Deputy Director of the government refugee agency – ARRA, Mr. Valentin Tapsoba, Director, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Africa and his deputy Ms Ann Encontre.



L-R- Ms. Ann Encontre, a Medical Doctor, Ms Cathrine Wiesner, Ato Ayalew Aweke and Mr. Valentin Tapsoba, visiting the Health Centre at the nearly two-year-old Hitsats camp which is still in an emergency mode. UNHCR/K.G.Egziabher

In Gambella, Ms. Wiesner inaugurated Jewi, a site recently provided by the Gambella Peoples National Regional State (GPNRS) to be developed to a refugee camp. In addition to the heads of ARRA and UNHCR, she was joined in launching the camp by Mr. Gatluak Tuk Khot, President of the GPNRS and Mr. Peter Vrooman, Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy in Ethiopia. She also visited Kule and Tierkidi camps that are sheltering nearly 100,000 South Sudanese refugees who fled the ongoing conflict in their country.

DAS Wiesner commended the amount of humanitarian work going into assisting the growing number of Eritrean refugees in the camps in Tigray but shared her worries about the increasing number of minors coming without accompanying family members. She also expressed concern about reports of more and more Eritrean refugees leaving the camps and travelling across borders in a risky journey to cross over to European and Middle-Eastern countries. "It looks like everybody is trying to understand the dynamics of the secondary

movement of the refugees but clearly there is no solution at hand,” she said. Ms. Wiesner called for an even better analysis of the causes and pattern of the secondary movement so that appropriate solutions can be devised.

UNHCR and ARRA officials spoke of the correlation between expansion of services and livelihoods options in the camps and the reduction in the pattern of secondary movement. “While expansion of services and improving livelihoods options in the camps could reduce the tide, there is not much that can be done to change the minds of those refugees who come with the intention of crossing over,” said Ayalew Aweke, Deputy Director of the Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs. UNHCR’s Valentin Tapsoba proposed the widening of legal migration options as a tool to reduce the risks that refugees would face in their attempt to cross over to either European or the Gulf States. Both UNHCR and ARRA agree that improving services and livelihoods opportunities in the camps is a good start. Representatives of humanitarian agencies complained about fund shortages which limit expansion of basic services in the camps. Inadequacies exist in critical life-saving services



Refugee children playing at the Youth-friendly center at Maiaini refugee camp. Humanitarian agencies believe expansion of such facilities in the camps may reduce the rate of secondary movement of refugees. UNHCR/K.G.Egziabher

including shelter, water, health and sanitation as well as domestic energy sources. It's difficult to comprehend that as the number of refugees keeps growing the amount of funds made available to assist these refugees is going down, according to a representative of one of the humanitarian agencies on the ground. The agencies appealed to DAS Wiesner to use her influence to increase funds to this “forgotten operation”, to use the ARRA official's phrase. There are over 125,000 Eritrean refugees in 4 camps in the Tigray region and two camps in the Afar region. More than 33,000 arrived in 2014, half of those in the last quarter.

Ethiopia is today Africa's largest refugee-hosting country with more than 670,000 refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan sheltered in 24 refugee camps established across the country.