

## A Glimpse of Afabet Sub-zone



**By: Habtom Tesfamichael**

Eritrea has strategic significance for military purposes and that is why successive colonizers, from the Turks up to the Ethiopians, built up their military bases in this region.

As a result, the people of the region were victims of colonial atrocities.

There are many documented cases of atrocious acts by the British war planes, the Italians and, more significantly, the Ethiopians. This region was the rear base of the Eritrean revolution during the 30-year war of independence and a fighting ground against the two successive regimes of Ethiopia that moved to crush the growing resistance of Eritreans. As a result, the inhabitants of the sub-zone were compelled to leave their villages.

Afabet sub-zone, 8,500 square km. wide, is the biggest sub-zone in the Northern Red Sea region. It has a population of 90 thousand who live in 14 administrative areas. The people live on farming, pastoralism and trade.

Following Eritrea's independence, one of the main objectives of the sub-zone administration was to move the scattered settlements into a central area to make it easier to provide social services and for administrative convenience.

The main resettlement centers selected, besides the town of Afabet, were the local administrations of Kamchewa, Kubkub, Felket and Klamet.

The town of Afabet was founded as a military base during Italian colonization. Until the defeat of the Ethiopian Nadow command in 1988, which resulted in the liberation of Afabet, the town had been a small town with small number of people and poor social services. But from then on it has grown to become a town of 40 thousand people with access to social services



Most of the people of the sub-zone are pastoralists. The rivers are diverted with the help of machineries for irrigation. Mr. Ahmed Mohammed Nur Rejeb, administrator of Afabet sub-zone, says "since the area is sandy and covered with powerful rivers from the Sahelian Mountains, we work with the people on water diversion systems for irrigation and to minimize the erosion of farm land along the river basins." Five check dams have been constructed to enrich underground water.

The Ministry of Agriculture in Afabet sub-zone gives extension services to the farmers by providing facilities and giving advice in farm management. Most of the arable land is rain fed, with around 9440 hectares of land mainly used to grow maize and sorghum. Moreover, they have established reserve areas to protect the forest and wildlife.

On 1688 hectares there have developed irrigated farm lands mainly in Kamchewa, Felket, Kubkub, Klamet around Hikano and in Western Afabet. At Kamchewa irrigated farm land of around 250 hectares, for example, farmers grow pepper and date palms. The farm land was given to families of martyrs in 1996- 97 to help them make a living.

Today, hundreds of families are sustaining their lives by working in the farms. Many farmers were nomads and irrigated farming has helped them to settle permanently. At the beginning every farmer was allotted one or two hectares of land and in the following years due to the rise in demand for land, the size of land distributed has been reduced.

The area around Afabet is a locust breeding place. Mr. Ahmed noted that the routine supervision they carry out helps control the spread locust. As a result, the damage to crops and vegetation inflicted by locust invasions has decreased in the last few years.

One of the priorities of the Eritrean government has been to provide equal access to education as education is considered a basis of development. Before Eritrea's independence there was only one school in the sub-zone, covering elementary to secondary level. But after independence, the number of schools in Afabet sub-zone has grown to more than 12 pre-schools, 27 elementary, 13 junior and, three secondary schools. This year, around 12 thousand students are enrolled in these schools.

Mr. Mohammed Ali Idris, head of the branch of the Ministry of Education in Afabet sub-zone, said that in addition to these schools, alternative crash programs have been made available for students who were unable to start school at the right age and for those who dropped out of school. The students who attend crash programs are assigned to ordinary middle schools once they have completed the elementary school level.

Mr. Mohammed said the students learn in their mother tongue which is making the teaching-learning process effective, not to mention the vital role it plays in maintaining the language and tradition of the people who live in the sub-zone. This has a positive impact on the development of local languages and minimizes the teaching learning problems.

The secondary school in Afabet has a laboratory and IT teaching aids. To improve the results and quality of education, the schools work in tandem with the communities' parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and by organizing tutorials and awareness raising campaigns. Annually hundreds of students participate in the summer civil service to engage in activities aimed at soil and water conservation, forestation and others. The number of students dispatched to complete their 12th grade and participate in the matriculation examinations is increasing.

Mr. Mohamed said in the early grades the enrollment of girls is satisfactory but tends to drop as it goes up to secondary school level. But those who were able to complete their high school education are now working in administrative posts and institutions in the sub-zone and other parts of the country. Currently, 44% of the students enrolled in the sub-zone are girls.

In the Afabet sub-zone, the health service has been improving both in quality and coverage. There are three health centers and the only health institution that was serving the people of the sub-zone has been upgraded to a hospital. Mr. Alamin Mohammed Ali, Head of the Ministry of Health (MoH) branch in the subzone, said that the health facilities are not enough and additional facilities are needed. In the meantime, he added, as some

members of the communities travel long distances for medical services, the MoH branch in the sub-zone has adopted measures to tackle the problem by training community health representatives, foot medics and outreach campaigns.



The physicians work to improve the people's health through awareness raising campaigns. Today, most pregnant women are giving birth at the health centers. Vaccination coverage has reached above 90% within the past few years. As a result, the mortality rate of mothers and children has reduced remarkably. Moreover, mortality rate due to malaria has been reduced to the lowest level.

One of the major problems the inhabitants of the sub-zone are facing transportation. The road that links the sub-zone to Keren is a seasonal road and during the rainy season it is very difficult to use.

The government of Eritrea gives significant attention to the rural areas based on the belief that all citizens should enjoy equal opportunities and access to state resources. A country's development is relative; development where one section of a society benefits from a country's resources while others are neglected does not ensure sustainable development.

All of the 14 administrative areas in Afabet sub-zone have access to potable water supply using solar panels, hand pumps and generators. And in Felket and Klamet administrative areas preparations are underway to start giving electrical power.

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