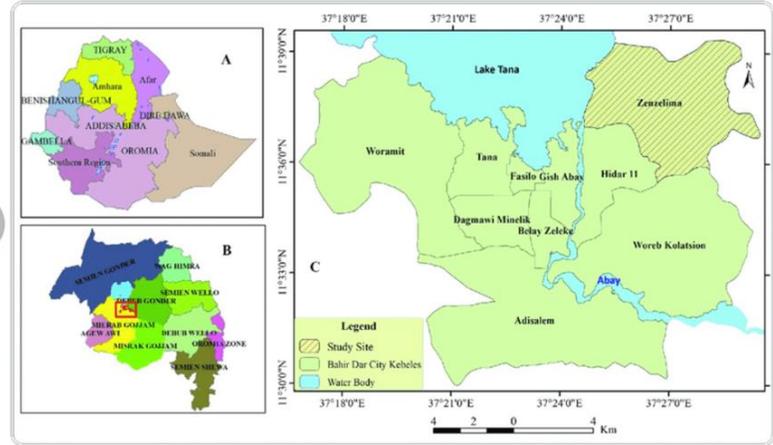


WOMEN LEFT TO BEAR THE BRUNT OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR, AS MEN GO OFF TO THE FRONT

¹The name Zenzelema has a nice ring to it and sounds like a happy place.

Zenzelema kebele is a satellite kebele of the Amhara Regional capital of Bahr Dar, located on the eastern shore of Lake Tana, the largest lake in Ethiopia and where the Blue Nile River exits the lake. The mild climate, lush vegetation, and lakefront gives Bahr Dar a scenic aura.



However, since four months ago, this kebele has been hosting thousands of IDPs fleeing the Tigray conflict that has now crossed the border and arrived in the heart of the Amhara Region. Most fled from North and South Wollo and Waghemra zones now under TPLF'S control. For most, this is the second, third, fourth wave of displacement in the space of four months.



Tse'ada Mohammed. ©Sophie Gebreyes/LWF.2020

Tse'ada Mohammed is such a person who fled From Hara in Raya Kobo, some 407.08 km from Bahr Dar as the TPLF forces advanced southward from Tigray.

Tse'ada fled with her three children, Yonas 12, Henock 8, and Biruk 3. Tse'ada found out she was pregnant with her fourth child after she fled Hara, in flight.

With her bad leg, pregnant and three young children in tow, the multiple displacements were trying at best.

¹ <https://www.researchgate.net> accessed on November 11 November 2021.

Like most women in Amhara region these days, her husband, Amarew Wossen joined the Amhara Special Forces -- and the war effort-- since the conflict began. With the conflict raging and with no sign of abating, they have been separated for months. Tse'ada does not know whether he is dead or alive.

Before the war spilled over into Raya from southern Tigray, Tse'ada and her husband were buying vegetables from Raya and selling them in Hara with a small markup. It was a subsistence living but they enjoyed a happy, quiet and most importantly a peaceful life. Ethiopians from Tigray and Amhara regions lived peacefully in good neighborliness until this conflict broke out and people began to turn against each other.



Tse'ada and her children, left to right: Henock, Yonas and Biruk. ©Sophie Gebreyes/LWF.2020

When news broke that Hara in Raya Kobo was going to fall to the TPLF, they fled to Woldia on foot some 50km away and stayed there for a week, when they had to flee again, walking another 31 km to Mersa. In Mersa, they were able to take the bus to Dessie, another 89 km away. Tse'ada and children stayed in Dessie for three months when the conflict caught up with them and had to flee again for the fourth time, this time to the regional capital Bahr Dar in the Zenzelema IDP site.

Life in Zenzelema is hard, it is crowded, there is no food, no water and the sanitation situation is critical with no latrines. There is open defecation everywhere as the buildings turned into makeshift IDP site were meant for a vegetable and fruit market for residents of Bahr Dar which never opened for business therefore no provisions were made for hygiene and sanitation facilities.

Besides food, NFIs, Tse'ada worries about access to health as she needs medicines to treat her disability as well as for regular check-ups for her condition. Tse'ada dreams of delivering her baby back home in Hara and of being reunited with her husband. Simple dreams, but ones that remain elusive.

FINDING SANCTUARY IN AN EECMY CONGREGATION IN BAHR DAR

Gwana is a 42-year old widow from Raya Kobo. Four months ago, Gwana and family fled first west to Woldiya where they stayed for one week, then when the war encroached on them, fled to Dessie where they stayed for another three months. When Dessie eventually fell to the TPLF in October, they were again displaced, this time to the regional capital, Bahr Dar.

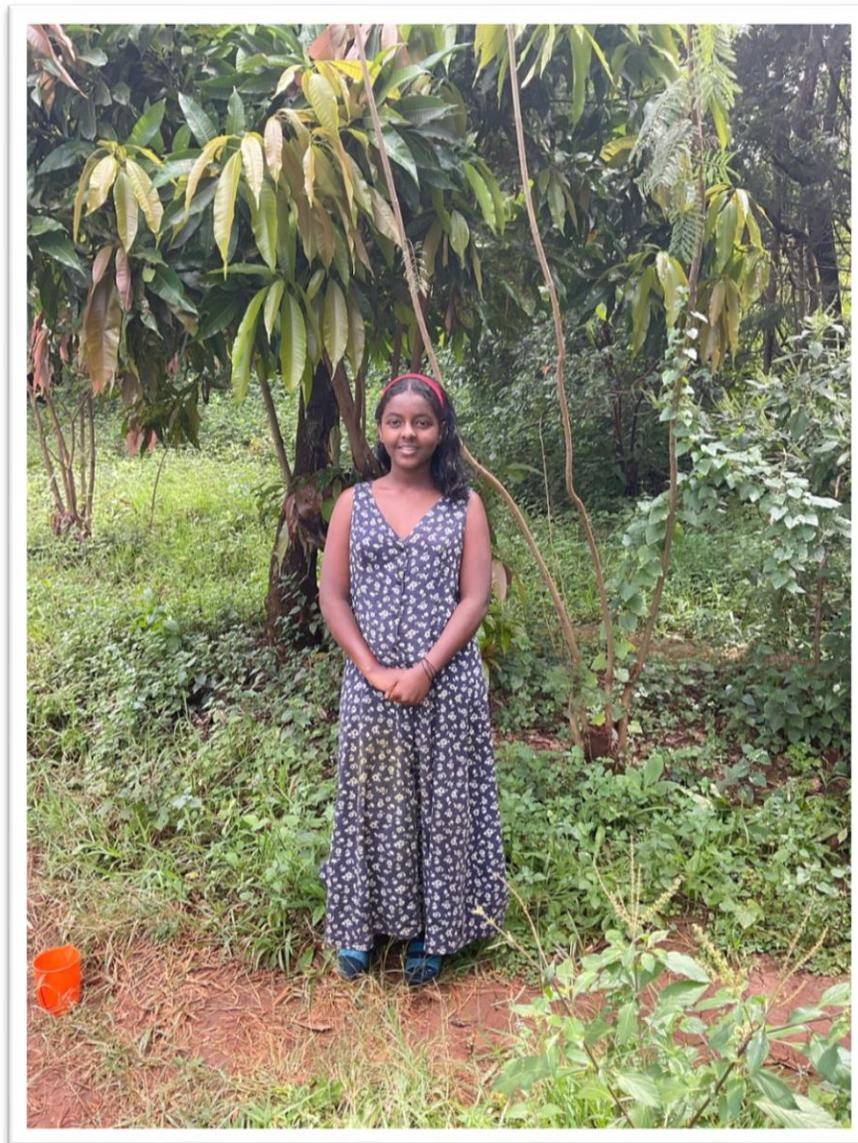
Gwana's late husband, Ermias Ale, was the EECMY/DASSC Director of the Compassion Project in Kobo before he passed away from kidney failure a year ago. Gwana was a housewife so only had the one income. After her husband's passing, a friend of her husband who lives in Denmark bought an onion chopper that she and her daughter Efrata used to chop onions for households and especially hotels and earned 3 ETB (EUR 0.05) per 1 kg.



From left to right: Nebiyou Ermias, Gwana Yehualaw and Efrata Ermias. ©Sophie Gebreyes/LWF.2020

Gwana's eldest son, Yonas Ermias, like most of the 25-year olds was conscripted and has joined the Amhara militia. He is stationed in the Kobo front and has not had his news for months. Her daughter Efrata, 15, finished 8th grade in school when the war broke out and had to abruptly interrupt her education. Her youngest son, Nebiyou, is only 10 and also not going to school anymore.

They have no news from home, they do not know how their friends and family who remained behind fared. Gwana says holding back tears: "I did not want to leave, I wanted to stay in my home, but when I heard what the forces do to young women, I could not bear expose my daughter and even my young son to such physical and sexual abuse, so preferred to leave everything behind and save our lives.



Gwana's daughter Efrata Ermias. ©Sophie Gebreyes/LWF.2020

When Gwana and children finally reached Bahr Dar, they were able to find sanctuary in Mekane Yesus Church.



Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church, Bahr Dar, Amhara. ©Sophie.Gebreyes/LWF.2020

Gwana lost all of her savings as she would buy new clothes and few household goods each time they would be displaced, and each time they would flee with only the clothes on their back. Gwana and family endured this four times. Now, in Bahr Dar, they have nothing and live off the generosity of the church and its members. They have also registered at Zenzelema IDP site, but at least they do not have to stay in the overcrowded rooms in the Zenzelema. They also have access to water. Food and NFIs are their greatest needs and education for her children.

Their dream is simple enough. Gwana and Efrata say in a chorus: “Our dream is to go back to Kobo. We were not rich, but we had a roof over our heads, the children were safe, happy and were going to school, that is all we want”.

A FOUR-DAY TREK FROM LALIBELA TO BAHR DAR

Getitu Tsege, 26, Fantaye Misgana, 25, Sisaynesh Fentanew, 20, Tsehay Woretaw, 32 Atkilt Bazezew, 30, Alem Yehualaw, 23, Mahlet Tesfay, 24, Hayat Mohammed, 30, Workenesh Maru, 25, Ayal Yalew, 25 and Emebet Alemu, 23 all fled the holy town of Lalibela when it fell to the TPLF, on August the 5th 2021.

They trekked for four days to reach Bahr Dar, passing through Gashena, Geregera via the Debre Zebit road. They did not go to Dessie via Woldia as others did and which would have been the most logical route, but the rebels had cut off the highway at Dilb, a getaway to Woldia. So they diverted and went to Bahr Dar the regional capital, deemed safest of all. In retrospect, it was a good decision as Dessie fell soon after and they were spared from being subjected to secondary displacement.

All these women traveled without their men, but with children and imbued with fear of coming face to face with rebel forces. They dreaded what would happen to them and their children as rumours were rife about sexual violence. Asked about the first few days under TPLF'S control, the women said that before they fled Lalibela, the first wave of TPLF soldiers who captured Lalibela did not harm them, but did commandeered their houses and would help themselves with their food. They also said that they told them to flee as those coming behind them will not be as forgiving. That was their cue to flee.



The women IDPs from Lalibela, Zenzelema IDP site. ©Sophie Gebreyes/LWF.2020

Once in Zenzelema, they are living in the open, women, children and men altogether exposed to the elements and protection risks. Being recent arrivals, they were not able to get rooms as these were overcrowded, filled by IDPs who came before them, mostly from Waghemra. They lack almost everything. Some have received mattresses, blankets and very few have received a pot and some soap. There is water but the dire need is sanitation. The only way to relieve oneself is open defecation. One has to tread carefully not to step on human feces everywhere. Already passing between buildings, the smell of urine is overwhelming. Unless addressed very soon, this situation could breed major diseases.



The most vulnerable are the children who are not eating as they should, have no milk to drink, no change of clothes nor diapers. There are also many pregnant and lactating women as well as people with disability, making their plight even more poignant.



Asked what their dream was, the women responded:” In the short term, we would like to be able to work and not depend on hand outs but since we fled without any credentials, no school diploma, no one would hire us. We also cannot even find anyone who can be a guarantor to vouch for us in lieu of credentials. In the mid to long term, GOD willing, we wish peace to prevail and would like to go back to Lalibela.

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