

Ethiopian Jewry
May 17-21, 1989



CONGRESSIONAL VISITS BRIEFING PAPER

TALKING POINTS ON ETHIOPIAN JEWS

There are approximately 15,000 Ethiopian Jews still in Ethiopia (estimates range from 12,000 to 20,000). Most are women, children and old people, the population that could not attempt the arduous trek to Sudan during the famine of 1984.

Approximately 17,000 Ethiopian Jews now live in Israel. Most are strong, young people who survived the trek and the desert refugee camps before being air-lifted to Israel between November 1984 and March 1985. Thus, virtually every family of Ethiopian Jews is painfully shattered and longs for reunification.

The community remaining in Ethiopia is deprived of its natural bread-winners and protectors. A significant portion live in areas affected by drought and civil war. Extreme poverty and disease are rampant. Letters from many Jewish villages report incidents ranging from social and economic harassment by non-Jews to violence directed at individuals and communities, including rapes, abductions, slave raids and murders.

The rapidly-progressing government "villagization" program poses immediate threats of increased harassment and unwanted assimilation to the tiny Jewish minorities who are moved into overwhelmingly non-Jewish environments. Many now fear the rapid end of a unique, devoutly religious and distinctively Jewish community which is thought to be 2,500 years old.

In recent months, the long-running civil war in Ethiopia reached very deep into Gondar Province, the center of Jewish life in Ethiopia. At one point the Tigrei Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) captured the towns of Debat (about 40 miles from Gondar City, the provincial capital) and Debark (about 60 miles from Gondar City). The situation around the city itself was sufficiently unstable to warrant the withdrawal of some relief workers. As of the first week in May, the government claimed to be in control of the area around Gondar City and felt their situation was stable enough to permit visitors to enter. However, the combination of violence, warfare, villagization and serious epidemics of malaria and meningitis have caused many Jews to flee their villages.

Ethiopian Jews in Israel long to have their families join them. Israel is ready and eager to receive them. The Jews in Ethiopia want only to be reunited with their families in Israel, which they consider their religious homeland. If permitted to leave Ethiopia, these Jews would not become refugees, but would enter Israel as citizens under the "Law of

Return." The U.S. must help them secure their basic human rights without delay.

Ethiopia is a co-signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, which includes the right of family reunification. It is earnestly hoped that the government of Ethiopia will permit the fragile remnant of its Jewish community to exercise this right.

Urge the Representative or Senator you visit to help ensure that the reunification of Ethiopian Jewish families becomes a prominent issue on any agenda concerning the improvement of relations between the United States and Ethiopia. If the Representative or Senator is not already a member of the Congressional Caucus on Ethiopian Jews, he or she should be urged to join immediately. If a member already, he or she should be requested to take a leading role.