

Rebecca: *This is Rebecca Mosley, working with Mennonite Central Committee in Ethiopia. Today I joined staff from Afar Pastoralists Development Association, one of MCC's partners in Ethiopia.*

We went on a 200 km journey to go and speak with some families, some households who had received emergency assistance, supported by MCC.

These families were from a part of the Afar region.

Meghan: *Meghan here, popping in real quick before we get back to Rebecca.*

Today we are going to be talking about what many are saying is one of the deadliest conflicts happening in the world right now—in Ethiopia.

While it has barely made the news, the Northern part of the country has entered its 17th month of civil war.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

The fighting between the Ethiopian Prime Minister's forces and the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front seems at a standstill. Human-rights groups have condemned atrocities on both sides.

And civilians are suffering from the violence, starvation and lack of medical attention.

Now, back to Rebecca.

Rebecca: *Afar is in the far East of Ethiopia. It's a very dry, arid and rocky terrain. The people who live here are pastoralists. Mainly raising goats but they also raise camels for transportation. Some of them have cows as well.*

Afar is strategically important in Ethiopia because the main road between the port in Djibouti and the capital of Addis Abbaba goes right through the heart of Afar. Otherwise, the people of Afar are very rural, they're pastoralists, they really don't care about general Ethiopian politics. They had nothing invested in the war that has taken place over the past 15 months. Nevertheless, they have been the group that really has suffered in many ways as much as anyone in this conflict.

The family that we went to speak with lived in a sort of a set of compounds, all part of an extended family. And fairly isolated. I couldn't see any other set of households nearby.

Rebecca: *I'm here in the Uwwa area and I'm speaking with a community here who was affected by the war and I'm here together with Halo who will be translating. And we are together with a woman who is willing to talk. So the first question, can she please say her name?*

Asiyah: *Asiyah Mohammed.*

Rebecca: *How long was she away from her home when she had to leave from this place?*

Translator (for Asiyah): *Okay, she has been four months away from her house. She packed after four months.*

Rebecca: After four months?

Translator (for Asiyah): After four months.

Rebecca: *Probably in late July, not sure of exact date, at 1am, in the middle of the night, the Tigrayan military force shot a massive piece of ordinance that landed about 50 metres from where they were all living. It was a terrifying experience. The family actually found the shell afterwards and showed it to me afterwards. It was a huge pipe, as thick as a man's leg.*

But with that shot, the family knew they had to flee immediately. So they got up in the middle of the night, they grabbed what they could, they ran with their children.

Translator (for Asiyah): This happened suddenly. Suddenly. So it was a very difficult time. Some of my relatives was with me. It is a very dangerous time.

Rebecca: *From what I could understand, they ran into a bush a certain distance to see what would happen, and they went back the next day or within a couple of days to try and rescue the rest of their animals. They were only partially successful.*

Translator: Children?

Rebecca: Yes, that was the thing I wanted to ask. She has children who are here with her. Are they here, her children?

Translator (for Asiyah): Two children, just two.

Rebecca: And the two small ones who were here?

Translator (for Asiyah): Yes, the small ones who were here. But she has five children.

Rebecca: Five children, okay. So, the daughters are the oldest ones?

Translator (for Asiyah): She's oldest one, yeah.

Rebecca: Okay. Does she have her husband with her still?

Translator (for Asiyah): Yeah, he is here.

Rebecca: And when they had to run away, did they all go together or did they have to go separately?

Translator (for Asiyah): We ran together. Some took their children and some also took their animals.

Rebecca: And she took her animals?

Translator (for Asiyah): Yeah.

Rebecca: *I think they had all their family members and they started out by foot with the animals they could bring with them. With their children. There was at least one very very old woman who was with them. The family said they walked at least 12 hours on foot, but I think it must have been longer when I see the area on the map where they went, to take shelter it must be 100 kilometers away, on pretty rough ground.*

So this extended family was there in the Geega grazing valley of the Dupte district and stayed in that area for the next four months. It was rainy season and throughout July and August the rains actually were quite prolific. This family and most of the others around them had no shelter except what they could make with bushes. Food was very scarce, they had to keep moving around because they had their animals with them so they couldn't just settle in any one particular camp.

Translator (for Asiyah): It was a very huge rain time. There was not any shelter, there was not any food, there was not any water sources. To bring water sources, we could not find anything with us. It was a very dangerous time. There was a very shortage of food.

Rebecca: *Meanwhile their home area became a battlefield. And there were several months of fighting between the Ethiopian federal forces and the Tigrayan military.*

When they returned four months later, they found everything destroyed. Their property, food, houses. Destroyed, looted, not usable.

Rebecca: When she came back, how did she find things here, after four months?

Translator (for Asiyah): House also broken, animals, area you are seeing, this also broken. All things were damaged when I come back this area.

Rebecca: *Throughout that time, the MCC partner APDA, was trying to reach families like theirs to deliver palm mats for shelters. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to find some of these families especially those that were in the Geega grazing valley because there are no roads, it's completely inaccessible. So the palm mat shelters were distributed only after people had returned back to their home areas. The woman we spoke with, Asiyah, said that she said she went to pick up her six palm mats to rebuild her house and carried them back on foot from the town of Uwwa. I think that's a six-kilometer walk.*

Rebecca: When she received the palm mats, how did she feel? What does it mean to her to have the palm mats and to build a house?

Translator (for Asiyah): She feels very happy. She wants to thank that project that helps us. So I want to thank this project that helped us buy this mat.

Rebecca: I want to tell her it's a beautiful house. It really makes sense for this place. It's the right house for this place.

Translator (for Asiyah): By the way, the Daboyta is Afar cultural house. It is beautiful house (*laughs*). You see, it is our culture. It is traditional from generation to generation. This is Afar uses it in culture. So, if you compare with others, it is not then. But in Afar it is very very, in the nomadic, in the rural community, it is very beautiful for Afar culture.

Rebecca: I think she must be a very strong woman in the middle of the night to get up and run away with her animals and children. I can't imagine this kind of experience, she must be very strong.

Translator (for Asiyah): She wants to thank you, you're coming from outside to us to see what happened, and what we are, at what time, at what situation we are. So, I want to thank you.

Meghan: *That was Asiyah Mohammed Hellem, a pastoralist from the Afar region, and Rebecca Mosley, who is one of the MCC reps in Ethiopia.*

Usmann Halo did the translating.

Next, we have a special guest. His name is Desalegn Abebe Ejo and he is a pastor at Meserete Kristos Church, an MCC partner in Ethiopia.

This summer and again in January, he visited some of the Northern districts that had been occupied. He spent time with congregations, finding out what had happened. And spoke with them about what they're doing to build peace in the region.

He joins me today on Zoom from his church in Addis Ababa.

Welcome, pastor Abebe. Thank you for speaking with me.

Pastor Abebe: Thank you for having me.

Meghan: *I understand you recently visited the northern regions of the country where the conflict is happening. The journey there was dangerous, it held risks for you to even travel to that area. Can you talk a little bit about what the journey was like and what the risks were to travel there?*

Pastor Abebe: Yeah, you know, no area, no road is safe by them. Somebody can stop you and kill you anywhere without any reason. Because doubt is over and people were killing and shooting each other. But since we are one body in Christ, if God protects us, let God protect us if you will die, that we die while doing you know, seeking our brothers and sisters in very difficult situations. We decided we went there. And there is a checking points everywhere. And we were conscious. And we didn't travel during night. But we travelled, checking things ahead what is going on ahead and we are we gathered information. And if there is something that we should stop from travel, we stay still for an hour or two, and then we travel. So it is a very, very, very difficult situation. But God protected us in those difficult situations. And that was unforgettable situation for our brothers and sisters who were visited in that area. That made something new for them, because it was difficult even for, for anyone to go there. You know.

Meghan: *What were some of the needs that you saw while you were there?*

Pastor Abebe: Yeah. Beyond the political rhetoric, people were suffering. They are in need of some trauma healing. You know, people were traumatized. Women, men, children, the survivors were totally traumatized. They didn't know what trauma is all about. Since we know something about trauma, how people feel, we read that people were traumatized totally. Beyond that, there are you know, there is no food, there is no water, no electricity, and no shelter at all. So, people are in need of some physical support and the psychological support and emotional strength as well. Beyond that, there are vulnerable people who have no one with them. So, the humanitarian aid, not directly reach them, because of the situation. So, there are people who, who suffered from the conflict, and also there are most vulnerable people among them, who did not receive fair share from the humanitarian aid, that is where the church should look for. And we support in some amount of money that we carry with us.

So that is a difficult thing that people have been complaining because people who can run people who can claim people who can ask for some support have been supported. But there are people who can't claim who can't work, who can't talk. They are the overlooked one. As a church, we are committed to reach them. One way or another to sustain their lives was the next day.

People felt that hopelessness and loneliness I read from the face of people, individuals, mainly women, and children felt they do not want to come close to anyone because of the conflict in the area. People were in need of someone who can tell them what next morning could look like. So, they were desperate in general. I see people without food who spent no days for in the localities without food and without shelter.

So they were desperate in general, so you can see from their faces, and from their words and their actions as well. So, yeah, it was a very sad story and sad moment for myself.

Meghan: *It sounds like it would be hard to see some of those things. And what was their response to seeing you come from another region of the country to come visit them?*

Pastor Abebe: You know, as I've said, they felt loneliness. And they expect no one to come in such a very difficult situation to visit them. When we arrived there without no notice that we are coming, some of them said, we assumed that God from heaven sent us an angel to visit us in our midst. Sitting and eating with them, our presence made them happy inside that they feel felt that someone is with us and for us.

So, I see widows whose husband was killed, and who fled to other countries like Sudan, and left at home with two kids. And now I I just give them hug and they were you know giving me a big hug, assuming that I'm their dad, not actually they know that I'm not their dad, that but they want to satisfy their hunger for their dad by giving me a big hug. And that was a very, you know, emotional moment for myself and for those people. We were weeping together, and which, which relieved us from our trauma, myself and the people in the in the in that situation. So, we were weeping together for some for some minutes. And that gave them relief.

And so we ate together, we pray together, we encourage them. And they wanted us to stay some any longer. But it was difficult for us to stay there, we have to go ahead and visit us and back to workplaces, or Addis Ababa, where it's a safe place. So we didn't able to stay there.

Meghan: *And can you tell me a little bit about what you saw and heard while you were there?*

Pastor Abebe: Yeah, regardless of the situations they were in, they say, we need peace. We want to live in our place, we need someone who can handle this conflict in a non-violent way. We have been living in this area for many years now. But we didn't imagine that our neighbours would kill us and displace us without no notice. So, people were mad, people were, you know, desperate. People do not able to trust anyone around them, because they didn't imagine that people whom they know would stand and kill them. And the displaced them, whom they trust for many years. So absence of trust is there. So, they do not want anyone to come closer to their houses and workplaces. So, people were traumatized in general. And so, they were praying for peace, they seek peace, they seek someone who can tell them tomorrow would be a good day for you. And God would intervene and make some, some peace and they would live, live lifethat God wants you to be. This is a word that people were looking for and asked for In the midst of that, traumatic situations,

Meghan: *Now I know you're part of an Anabaptist Church, nonviolent church, what do you see as the role for Anabaptist churches in situations of conflict like this?*

Pastor Abebe: Yeah, I'm happy that I'm a member of Anabaptist church. In fact, you know, we encourage before the beginning of even the conflict, we sense it, some of the situations around us, and we encourage church leaders to pray about this, and not to take any position regarding the conflict. The conflict is about to come. And we don't know the boundaries. But we encouraged and trained our leaders not to take any positions, whatever it would be.

So, our leaders tried their all best not to take any position, with words with actions, everything. So besides that, we as a church has been known as peaceful church in our history, simply because of our tradition as Anabaptist. And also, we have developed such a tradition in our local churches in our head office and regional office that we resolve try to resolve I would say, try to resolve conflict, internal conflict and outside conflict, as much as possible with non-violent method.

So, people knew that we are, you know, kind of peacemakers in the community. So besides that, we have materials on trauma healing, we have materials on peacebuilding, we have materials, on reconciliations, we have materials on restorative justice whatsoever.

So we have knowledge, we have practice. So it is a time for us to take our knowledge into action to help the community around us. By now, universities, governments, and community leaders are asking us to come over and help them in training people, like in trauma, healing, and reconciliation. And the many things. So, MKC, Meserete Kristos Church is now at the center of the community to do something from its experience from this documents and from this tradition.

Besides that, if you heard the story that we are working in prison, we have a prison ministry. Prisoners are prisoners anyway. So, they are criminals, they have no rights. The bad thing is, after having finished their time in prison, they are afraid not to go out because of their opponent is outside. So as a church, what we do is, we process the reconciliation before they exit from the prison. This was areas where people and the government can't do any reconciliation in that because of the strong traditions they have.

If you got this, it is, it is a vicious circle that one kills relative, it is a must for someone to kill your relatives, that is a revenge cycle. But that cycle was broken by the ministry of prison that we have been in for the last 25 years now. So that's why, what why I said, I'm very happy and lucky to be a member of a global Anabaptist church with a tradition of non-violent and non-resistant in our thoughts.

Meghan: *It's so interesting to hear you talk about that. As somebody who has experience and I think a lot of people right now are thinking about that. What does peace look like in the middle of conflict, very real conflict. And it's really interesting to hear from somebody who has very first-hand experience and what that looks like. So thanks for sharing that.*

How do you hope the work that you're doing will make a difference for the future of Ethiopia?

Pastor Abebe: Yeah, we hope that we will make a difference. Because the practice what we have been sharing would impact positively the community from small to bigger one. So, now we are working with the youth in the universities, who are in need of some skills, how to live with, you know, students in the compound. We are there to teach them about coexistence peacefully with non-resistant way. So, now,

people are in need of peace, people are praying for peace, the only ways the method how to do is not there. So we are there to do what we can. And hopefully we get some support from our side technical support, financial support, or emotional support. That is a way that we can be a light in the dark, and salt in the bitterness of a broken world that we are living right now.

Meghan: *What a beautiful image to end our conversation. And is there anything else that you wanted to say that we didn't cover?*

Pastor Abebe: Yeah, last I would like to thank our partners who have supported in many ways, when we were in need. In fact, some gave us weapons to fight each other. Others have given us ideas to set [us] apart. But you, brothers and sisters from the States, Canada or elsewhere, gave us money to sustain our lives. We are very thankful for that. God bless you. Your money has been the direct way to save lives. May God bless you. I thank you.

Meghan: *Thank you so much, Pastor Abebe for joining me in this conversation and for being on our podcast.*

Pastor Abebe: Thank you.

Meghan: *That was Desalegn Abebe Ejo, a pastor in Ethiopia.*

That's it for this episode.

Thank you to Asiyah Mohammed Hellem for speaking with us earlier in the episode, to Usmann Halo for doing the translating and to Rebecca Mosley for gathering the tape.

Next month, we'll be talking about how our partners in Haiti are feeling the impacts of climate change.

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This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)