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OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONGREGATIONS TO HELP ERITREAN REFUGEES

BACKGROUND: The United States Department of State is presently bringing to the U.S. for resettlement here, many refugees that have fled religious, political and personal persecution in the country of Eritrea, located in Africa on the Red Sea, just north of Ethiopia. Most of the Eritrean refugees are coming from Shimelba, a remote refugee camp in northern Ethiopia. Some are also coming from refuge in Djibouti, a small country bordering Eritrea.

NATURE of the REFUGEES: There is a broad mix of backgrounds and history with the immigrants. Citizens of Eritrea of all backgrounds have fled the repression – students, professionals, soldiers, homemakers, children, farmers. Many are in families, many are single. Some have a college education, some a high school diploma or just a 7th grade education, some no schooling at all. Many of the parents have been in the camp so long that their 6 or 7 year-old children were born in the camp.

The refugees have been courageous in accepting an offer to start their lives all over again by relocating around the world in our country, and meeting the unknown head-on. They are a gentle, industrious and ambitious people, that tend to exhibit an exceptionally high work ethic.

THE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS: In summary, the U.N. refugee office (UNHCR) refers candidate refugees in the hosting country, to the U.S. Department of State, for consideration for resettlement here. The candidates undergo physical exams and several interviews, and once cleared by the Dept. of Homeland security, they are referred to a resettlement agency here, which in turn assigned the individual or family to an affiliate in one city or another. The resettlement agency then receives the refugee(s) when they arrive, and administers an allowance (presently \$900 per person) from the State Dept. for initial establishment of the refugee here, including for an apartment, furniture, food and clothing. The resettlement agency provides a case worker to tend to the refugees to get them set up with social security, medical attention, school registration, etc. The refugees are immediately permitted to work legally.

The case worker is to establish state or local welfare benefits for the refugees for cash assistance, food stamps, health care, and in some cases, transportation expenses. Provision of an interpreter as needed is done by the agency. The objective is to get the refugees settled, working and independent as soon as possible, with employment, children in school, etc. The resettlement agency generally discontinues its services for the case after several months, though some agencies continue to look after cases for some months further, depending on resources and budget.

WHERE CONGREGATIONS CAN HELP: There is great value for the refugees if they can receive personal help, encouragement and friendship from Americans, as part of the resettlement process. The resettlement agencies can do only so much and for so long. And support by a local Eritrean community may be limited – and sometimes limiting* – an objective is to help the refugee to learn to navigate the needs, operation and requirements of life in America, all to achieve satisfactory independence of living.

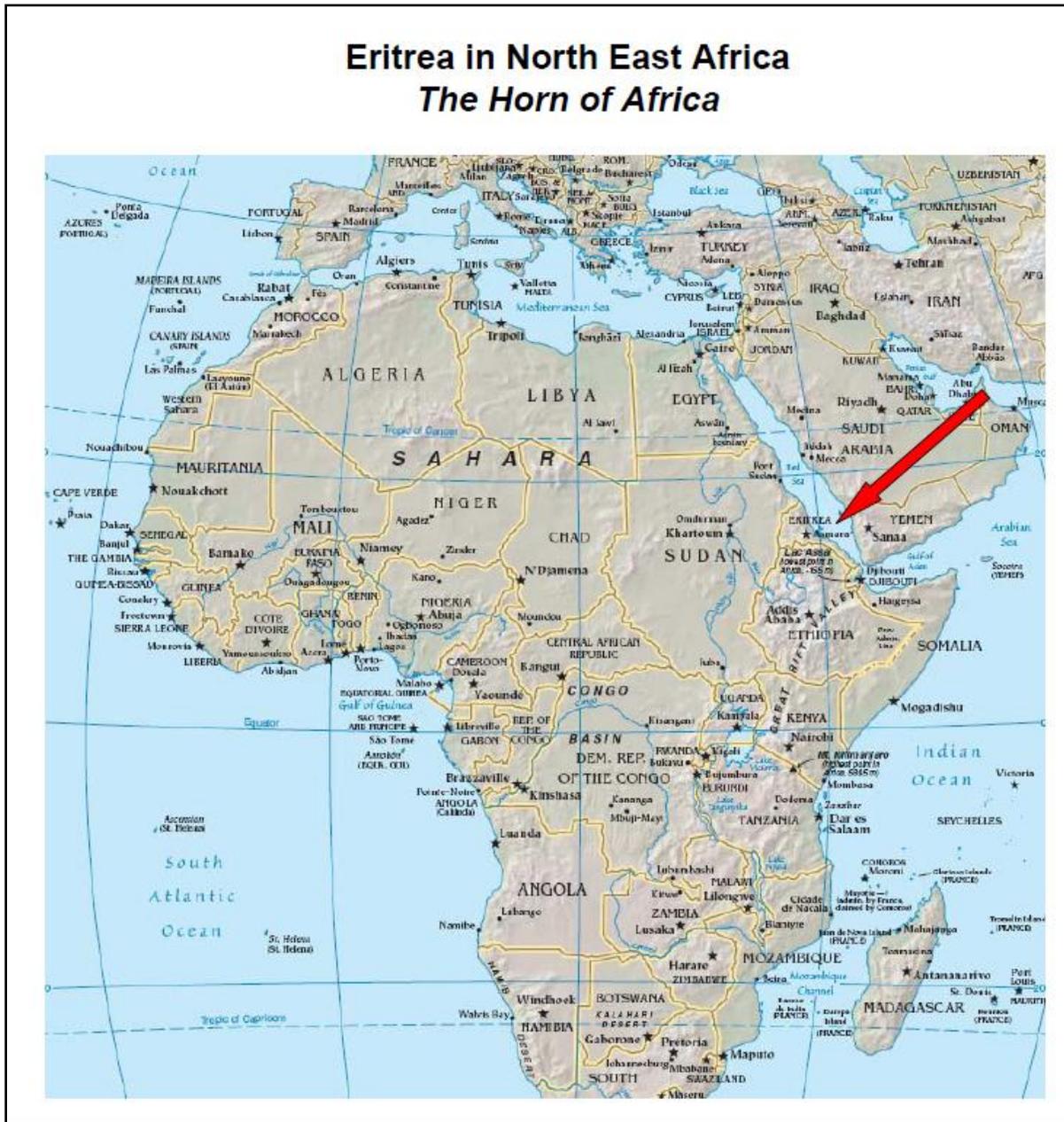
Congregations can help in different ways and to different extents – it doesn't have to be all-or-nothing. Here are some variations of extent of support:

- One person or a few or a committee or an entire congregation
- Ongoing; or until certain goals are met; or time-limited
- With or without providing financial support for the refugee
- In partnership with the resettlement agency or independently, though initial orientation and introduction by the agency are highly desirable
- Ready when the refugee arrives or pick up at some point after arrival

Examples of how congregations can be involved – choose what appeals and is feasible:

- Greet upon arrival
- Join the case worker in visits and trips
- Finding a suitable neighborhood and home (usually an apartment)
- Help with daily living things: using a computer, bank account and writing checks, the mail system, the Laundromat, paying bills, etc.
- Registering children in school
- Being safe/secure
- Job searches, applications; job training
- Hygiene
- Using public transportation
- English: vocabulary, pronunciation, reading & writing

Congregation members or representatives who are caring, generous and willing to share time and talents, and are interested in exploring possibilities of helping with Eritrean refugees should contact the local resettlement agency.



Congregations include churches, synagogues and mosques.

*Established Eritrean communities may have members who are sympathetic or even loyal to the offending regime in Eritrea, and may pressure or even re-traumatize the refugee for fleeing the country.