

ERITREA

Responding to the basic needs of the IDP population in new resettlement areas

As blue grey clouds swirl overhead, a gush of icy wind sweeps through the terrain, and rain starts to fall, first a modest shower, then a powerful torrent, turning the dry, cracked earth into rust-hued mud. Forty-year-old Tebereh picks up her four-year-old daughter, Lula, while she readjusts the strap attaching a water-filled jerrycan precariously onto her frail back. She nudges her seven-year-old son, Senay, to quicken his pace, as they have only come half way of the trek up the hills to reach their home in Lahyo village. Tebereh grimaces as mist gathers and worries about her five other children she has left at home, especially her youngest son, who has been sick for the last few days. "He has fever and since a few days he does not eat," says Tebereh looking up the mountain.

The rain does not last long, and within an hour Tebereh and her children arrive back on the plateau of Lahyo, in southern Debub region, at an altitude of 2,400 m atop an escarpment overlooking the border. Tebereh's community, as is the case with the other communities around Lahyo, was displaced during the 1998-2000 border conflict and was resettled in February 2006 to allow families to start rebuilding their lives.

While waiting for the new water system to be constructed, families are making a three-hour journey to the river down the hill to fetch water. As in most parts of rural Eritrea, especially in hard-to-reach mountainous areas, the scarcity of water has serious consequences on children's health. Respiratory infections and diarrhoea, leading to dehydration and undernutrition, are common among children.

"We are preparing to start a supplementary feeding programme very soon, so that the nutritional needs of undernourished children can be met," says Abraham, a nurse working at the newly opened health post in Lahyo. UNICEF has supported the health post with vaccines, essential drugs and a solar system to maintain the cold chain. Having a health post in the village, thus bringing health care close to families and children, has greatly increased the possibility of caregivers to seek help when a child is ill. Families in Lahyo previously used to walk 20 km to the closest health station in Forto or 30 km to Senafe's hospital for complicated cases.

Tebereh is bringing up her children single-handedly, which is hardly an uncommon feature in Eritrea where 47 per cent of households are female headed. Walking long distances to reach a health facility, while leaving the rest of the children alone at home, is for many women only a last resort and children often miss the opportunity to treatment.

In order to feed her family Tebereh tends a small plot of chickpea farm. The previous year's drought, erratic rain and plant disease have only brought her a modest crop and income. "It is hard work, and I have to leave my children at home, although the older ones can at least go to school while I am working," says Tebereh.

With UNICEF's support, primary schoolchildren in 12 communities in and around Lahyo are able to go to school. In Lahyo, UNICEF supported the construction of make-shift classrooms to accommodate all school-aged children.

It is estimated that the Government, supported by a joint United Nations programme and partners, was able to resettle over 40,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2006 and 2007, while close to 13,000 IDPs are still in camps. Like Tebereh and her family, many returned or resettled IDP families are still living in precarious conditions, and basic social services in the host communities, including water resources and health care, are stretched.

UNICEF has been responding to the basic needs of the IDP population in new resettlement areas, supplying clean water through the construction and rehabilitation of water supply systems; building make-shift classroom schools and providing school material; and distributing non-food items and emergency health kits.

In addition, mines and unexploded ordnance remain a silent threat to both IDPs and surrounding communities. Children are victims to more than half of mine incidents in the country. Through a UNICEF-supported programme in the two regions for IDP resettlement, Debub and Gash Barka, more than 17,500 people (including over 10,000 children) were reached with mine-risk education by the Eritrean Demining Authority teams during the first half of 2007.