

## Daily life in Ethiopia.

Addis Ababa is a developing city, with new buildings going up everywhere. There are more educated, middle class people living in Addis now than at any other time. However, even here, it is the poor that predominate. The city is not zoned into rich and poor neighbourhoods, like Britain. Here, the poor are more likely to be living against your compound wall, in small wattle and daub rooms roofed with corrugated iron. Look out at the back of our house, and you see corrugated iron roofs patched with plastic bags against the rain. Each morning, the smoke of cooking fires finds its way through the many gaps in the roof. A crier blows his tirumba (bugle) as he runs through the cobbled alleyways, announcing news of that night's dead. "People of Abebe Souk; people of Abebe Souk, wake up! Come out of your homes and help us bury the body of Ato Mesfin!" By night, the sounds of families retiring early to sleep (daily life begins before dawn here) gives way to the howling and barking of dogs across the city, driven to distraction by the hyenas coming down from the mountain to scavenge under cover of dark. In Addis, as everywhere, food prices have risen steeply. Some say by as much as 70% in the past year. The price of teff (an indigenous grain, used to make injera, a staple food), split peas, onions, chickens, coffee, tea, sugar and kerosene changes daily and everyone can tell you exactly by how much, by whom and where to buy it cheaper. Many families live on one meal a day. Meat is a rare luxury, usually reserved for Orthodox or Moslem festivals. Beggars set up a regular pitch outside churches and on street corners, but traffic lights are prized as prime spots from which to make enough to feed your children. But Addis Ababa is not Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is a largely rural country. People rely on the land almost completely. In the south and west, lush greens clothe the rolling hills. Great, Rift Valley lakes, home to stunning birdlife, shimmer in the heat. Acacias, fig trees and beautiful flowering trees all mask the fact that, behind the scenes of verdant beauty, people are hungry. The only way to tell is by looking to see how thin the cattle are. A family may have sold its only cow to survive. Seed, given for next year's harvest, has been ground to make bread for today.

In the Gambella, the far west, it usually rains a lot. It's now August and it still has not rained enough. The soil here is rich and fertile and could produce a magnificent yield. But the maize planted in April sprung up only to wither and dry on the stems under the relentless sun. In the heat, tempers flare, fights break out [often with fatal results] and cattle raiders start to slip over the border from South Sudan. They burn homes, steal the few remaining cattle and even some of the children. They say they're sold as slaves in Khartoum. If the rains do come, like last year, there'll be so much of it and at the wrong time that the newly planted crops will be simply washed away in the floods.

In the north and east, the topography is harsher, more spectacular. The rugged mountain peaks of the north give way to vast stretches of empty, rocky desert in the east. Here, pastoralists roam for hundreds of miles, to graze their cattle or camels. In the markets, women sit over small bundles of twigs that they've gathered somewhere in the vast landscape outside the town, tied with bark and offered for sale as kindling. In one place, it hasn't rained for several years now. For the past three years, there has been no harvest, of any kind. Someone offers food for work – a common enough relief strategy – the people laugh, "Look at us. We're too weak to work."

The government here is doing everything in its power to distribute food, working closely with local communities on many issues: to settle disputes, to plan grazing, altering crop varieties, changing harvesting periods and educating people about soil and water conservation. And the people are willing to learn. And if they could just get a break, they could put it all into practice. You see, despite the problems of this huge country, there is still no corruption here. Ethiopia is a beautiful country, with beautiful people.

*Andrew Proud. Addis Ababa. Ethiopia.*