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ERITREA

Facts about Eritrea

Eritrea, officially called the State of Eritrea is one of the countries in the region known as the Horn of Africa. It is located in the north eastern part of Africa and shares a border with three countries: Djibouti in the southeast, Ethiopia in the south and Sudan in the west. Its capital city Asmara was an early example of a planned city. It was constructed with quite specific features such as designated spaces for political activities, wide boulevards and spaces for development.

Population: 4.9 million

Life Expectancy: 57. (UK - 78.5)

Health: 2.4% of the population suffer from HIV/AIDS. In the UK it is 0.2%

Education: Primary School – 48% of girls (UK 99%) and 50% (UK 99%) boys
Secondary School – 20% (UK 94%) of girls and 30% (UK 90%) boys

Literacy: Current literacy levels in Eritrea are unknown

Languages: Afar, Arabic, Tigre, Kunama, Tigrinya

Currency: Nafka

Poverty Levels: 50% of people in Eritrea live below the poverty line.

14% of people in the UK live below the poverty line

Data from – www.unesco.org and
www.cia.gov.uk/library/publications/the-world-factbook

Some figures are approximate.





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An ancient country, Eritrea has had a varied history which dates back 3,500 years. In ancient times, it is believed that what is now Eritrea was famous for its trade in incense. Interestingly, in 1995, the remains of one of the earliest human families was found in Buya in Eritrea by an Italian scientist.

In the 20th century, Eritrea was colonised by Italy, then occupied by the British and in 1952, it was declared an autonomous region with Ethiopia by the United Nations. However in 1962, in a movement led by Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia illegally took control of Eritrea beginning a devastating 30 year war between the two countries. In April 1993, a referendum was held in which Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence, and independence was at last declared on 24 May 1993.

However, border disputes with Ethiopia still continue to this day, and sadly Eritrea is one of the least developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Eritrea is a very poor country facing constant food security problems. In 2003 about 70% of the population depended on foreign assistance for food, and 66% of the population were living below the poverty line (rising to 80% in rural areas). The human rights situation in Eritrea is very poor, with opposition parties banned, large numbers of people detained without trial, and no free press. Eritrea's economic future depends upon solving social problems such as illiteracy, unemployment, and low skills, and more importantly, on the government's willingness to support democracy.



What are Human Rights?

Human Rights are based on the belief that all humans are born free and equal and entitled to the same rights and freedoms.

The International Declaration of Human Rights was written in 1948 just after World War II. It lists all the Rights that all humans should have.

This includes:

The Right to life, liberty and security of person.

The Right to freedom

The Right to freedom of opinion and expression

The Right to vote

The Right to education

There are many more Rights listed in the Declaration of Human Rights. You can read them here:

www.knowyourrights2008.org

Unfortunately in some countries the people are not given all of the rights that they should be. Why do you think that the Declaration was written? Why do you think these Human Rights are important?

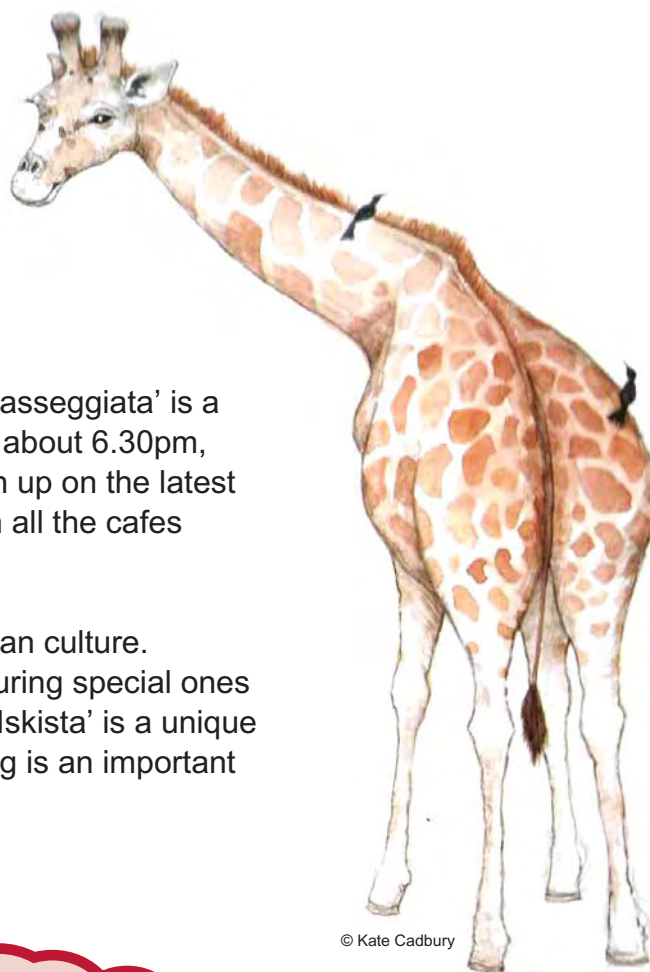
Culture

Generally, on first impressions, Eritreans are often thought to be quite quiet and reserved, however, as people often are, when the ice is broken, bonds are formed.

In the capital city Asmara, the custom of the 'passeggiata' is a vibrant ritual not to be missed! From 5pm until about 6.30pm, everyone in town meets at Harnet Ave to catch up on the latest news and gossip. It's never a time to miss with all the cafes and terraces packed with people.

Dance is also a very important aspect of Eritrean culture. People dance on every occasion, especially during special ones such as marriages and religious ceremonies. 'Iskista' is a unique dance style done in Eritrea where body shaking is an important aspect of the dance!

See Activity Eleven



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Coffee



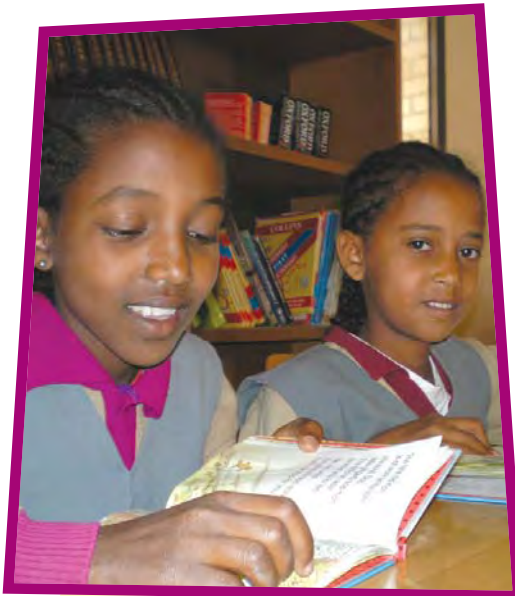
Coffee plays a very significant part in Eritrean social life. Coffee is always offered to visiting friends, in the "coffee ceremony". First the coffee beans are roasted and then the guests are invited to smell the aroma of the roasting beans. The beans are then ground with a traditional mortar and pestle.

Then it gets really complicated! The ground coffee is put in a jug called a 'jebena' with some hot water and then boiled. Once the coffee bubbles out of the jug it is poured in and out of another jug to cool it. Then it is put back in the 'Jebena' and boiled again! Once the coffee is ready it is poured by the host through a filter into handle free cups on a small tray for their guests. Sometimes they burn incense during the ceremony too and also eat popcorn.

They then re-use the grounds - the first round of coffee is called 'awel', the second 'kale'i' and the third 'berek'a' ('to be blessed').

See Activity Six

Book Aid International in Eritrea



Books for Schools

The government of Eritrea has been faced with many challenges whilst trying to rebuild its war-torn country. However, there is strong commitment to education and this is where the bulk of Book Aid International's support to Eritrea is focussed.

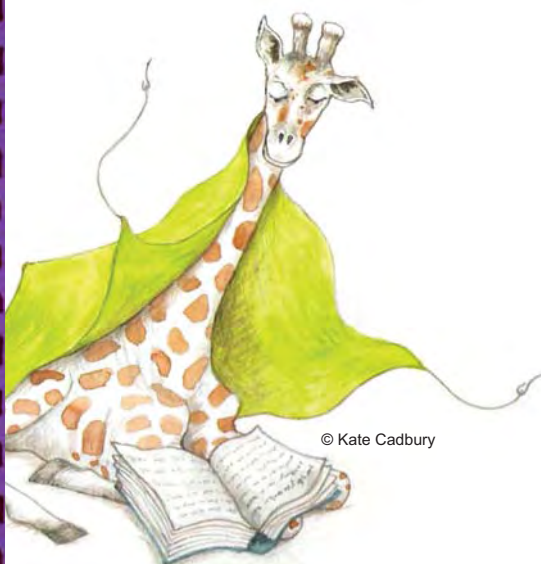
The number of children attending school has increased a lot in the last few years. This is great news, however most schools have very limited access to books and other learning materials. Books are in such short supply in Eritrea that some liken the shortages to a famine.

“The book famine in Eritrea has been minimised because of Book Aid International”

Michael Teckie, British Council Eritrea

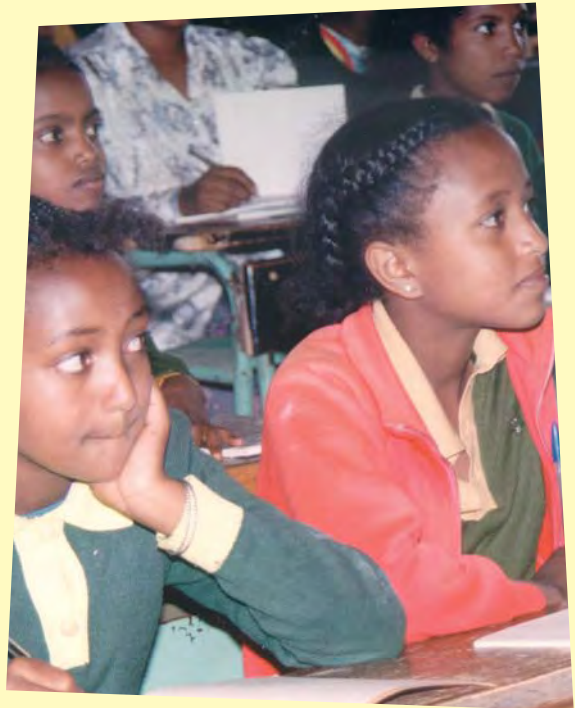
This increase in the number of children going to schools means that the lack of books to support the new pupils is a problem in many African countries. This is why the work of Book Aid International is so important. Through the SLS (the Schools Library Service under the Ministry of Education) we provided over 7,000 books for Eritrean schools in 2007. Book Aid International also supports a Book Box scheme which helps to promote reading in rural areas.

The pupil to teacher ratio in Eritrea is estimated as one teacher per 47 pupils.



Book Aid International's director, Clive, went to Eritrea to see the work that we do there. This is what he found!

"It is clear that there is still a great need for more books, especially in the sciences and English. One striking thing about the schools is that there is now an equal number of girls and boys at secondary level. Teachers we talked to all said that girls were doing better in their studies than boys, perhaps a familiar story to people in the UK, but especially encouraging in the Africa context where girls have so often missed out on even the most basic schooling..."



Clive at Decemhare Junior School

It is my first visit to see what happens to some of the hundreds of thousands of books that I see everyday in our warehouse, and to meet the people who make sure that at this end, the right book gets to the right person. In Eritrea, they are doing a wonderful job."

"Last semester, when the book box scheme started, the reaction of students was quite wonderful... The youngsters had NEVER seen such books: lovely to touch and beautiful to look at... Our schools have zero access to attractive books other than those given by Book Aid International."

Alex Hamilton, Ministry of Education, Eritrea



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Want to learn more?

Try your local library, your school library or the internet to find out more about Eritrea.