

Repair of the 2nd Portuguese Bridge Planned

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With the successful completion of the on-site survey, the American effort to help repair the Second Portuguese Bridge (“Sebara Dildiy” or Broken Bridge on the Abai Wenz) is proceeding to the next step. The survey trip was performed in early June on foot, given the extremely steep terrain of the Nile gorge.

Starting in the Gojjam city of Mot’a, the survey party consisted of 3 members of the private American charitable bridge building organization “Bridges To Prosperity”, 4 personnel from the Addis company “Wonz-Dar Expeditions” (the same firm that handled the logistics for the National Geographic raft trip down the Abai in 1999), 8 locally hired porters and donkey drivers, and 2-6 security escorts contributed by the local Wereda and Kebele. After a long and hot first day trek of 20 kilometers and falling 1,100 meters in elevation, the survey party reached the site of the broken bridge, immediately setting up camp. The following day was spent taking measurements of the pedestrian bridge and performing structural analysis on its condition. That afternoon, 9 elders, who had walked down to the bridge from the Gojjam village of Agum Woha, met with the team to discuss the history of the bridge, the many deaths that occur each year while attempting to cross, water levels, wind speeds, and how a partnership might be created to perform the actual construction in the upcoming dry season. The Americans were genuinely touched by the heartfelt comments made by the elders, one of whom said: “When I see the bridge repaired for my grandchildren, I can then die in peace.”

During their stay at the bridge, the team also counted the people, animals, and commodities that dangerously pass by rope between the two severed sides. Later, the team would present economic analysis to Ayechew Kebede (Economic Development Director of the Amhara State) in Bahir Dar, demonstrating the repaired bridge would allow for the passage of 27,000,000 ETB of goods per year, thereby giving a substantial economic boost to the Gojjam and Gondar regions.

The third day, the team crossed the Abai by raft and rope, completed further measurements on the Gondar side, and then hiked up the gorge to the village of Gbeshi, through Imeger, before setting up camp again in Maksegnet. Here, the team was met by vehicles to continue onto Iste and Bahir Dar. Before leaving the area, a meeting was held with over 40 elders from the villages surrounding Arota. As in the case of the meeting with the Gojjam elders, this meeting proved very successful and beneficial to all concerned. The Arota elders also promised any and all assistance to the American team, including the difficult job of transporting the steel bridge components by hand and donkey from Gbeshi to the Abai.

Before returning to Addis, the team spent 3 nights in Bahir Dar to discuss the project in detail with Amhara State Officials. One of the most important subjects discussed was how the proposed repair plan would substantially benefit the eventual restoration of this historically important structure. Backed up by photos and engineering analysis, two primary points were made:

That unless immediate steps were taken to repair the center pier footings under the existing water level, the bridge would soon be lost to the Abai forever.

That unless immediate steps were taken to shore up the second archway on the Gojjam side, it would collapse.

Everyone agreed that the loss of the Sebara Dildi would be a tremendous historical loss, and must be avoided. All involved were pleased to hear that “Bridges to Prosperity” had solutions for the above problems included in its plan of repair. Much time was spent discussing how the steel bridge, placed on top of the existing structure, would act much in the same way that steel shoring and support poles are used to prevent old church walls from falling outward. The team further presented information that showed that approximately 1,700,000 ETB would be further saved in eventual restoration cost, by allowing the proposed plan to proceed. Also presented, were drawings showing how the steel bridge would attach to the existing stone bridge without disturbing it in any way. Lastly, the group showed how the steel bridge could be easily removed after future restoration, and then re-used for other needed Ethiopian crossings. The last four days were spent in the capital meeting with Ethiopian Federal Officials and enjoying the sights and markets, before finally departing back to the USA on June 11th. Specifically, the team met with Ato Yusuf Abdullahi Sukkar, Tourism Commissioner, Ato Girum Abay, Acting Director General Europe-America Directorate in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ato Girma Adamu, Counselor in the Europe-American Directorate. Both the Foreign Affairs and Tourism Ministries have provided much support and assistance to the American effort.

The “Bridges to Prosperity” team hopes to receive final approval from the Amhara State before June 25, 2001, thereby allowing steel fabrication to commence immediately thereafter. The group is currently obtaining bids from steel fabricators in both Ethiopia and the USA. If all goes as planned, the group will return in January 2002 to help complete the repair. Given that all bridge components will be prefabricated, on-site construction is estimated to take only one-two weeks for the steel and three weeks for the pier reinforcement. Counting the value of contributed local manpower from the Wereda and Kebele, transportation, in-kind donations, and a financial grant from the “Bridges to Prosperity” organization, the overall repair value exceeds 1,200,000 ETB. Additional information on the history and current status of the bridge project can be found at the web site: www.bridgestoprosperty.org. This web site will be updated with photos and information from the survey trip by June 30, 2002.