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# Huge crack splitting Africa in two

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Staff Reporter

Article **Photos (1)**

Published On Thu Nov 05 2009

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Africa's eastern edge has begun to crack away along a 60-kilometre rift that appeared virtually overnight.

According to a new study, the continent will eventually split along a 5,000-km line between Ethiopia in the north and Mozambique in the south. A huge new ocean will fill the gap between the resultant land masses.

The surface fault in the arid, sparsely populated region of Afar in Ethiopia appeared over the course of 10 days in September 2005, according to seismologist Atalay Ayele of Addis Ababa University. It was prompted by underground volcanic activity.

At its widest, the so-called Afar Depression is roughly a football field across. At its deepest, it goes down two kilometres.

Ayele described it Thursday "as the most exciting place on Earth" to study the large-scale seismic effects of tectonic shifting. Most faults this size appear beneath the oceans.

"It is very hostile to study under the sea," said Ayele from his office at the university. "There



A massive 60-kilometre rift in eastern Africa could end up splitting the continent in two. NASA

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are only two places on the planet where you can see the transition between oceanic and continental rifts on dry land. They are Iceland and Afar. And Afar is not contaminated by glaciation."

The split is not expected any time soon. Ayele referred to a "geologic time scale" running to a million years. However, he said, "a series of volcanic events" might push that timetable up significantly, to a thousand years or so.

For now, the rift is the province of a small group of academics and the desert people who live alongside it. Some villages running alongside the rift are as much as 70 metres below sea level, putting them in danger from an opening that stretches down more than 600 storeys.

"There is life going on around (the rift)," Ayele said. "It is like a big water tower which is protected by volcanic walls. And the process is still continuing."

Are the villagers in danger?

"Yes, but the good thing is that there are nomads," he said. "They're always portable."

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