

Cornered by Conflict: Eritrean Refugees in Northern Ethiopia Need Resettlement in a Safe Third Country

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Eritrean refugees remaining in Tigray and other parts of northern Ethiopia are in danger. Various state and regional actors in the ongoing conflict in Tigray view these refugees with suspicion or outright hostility. First-hand witnesses, corroborated by other credible sources, report that Eritrean refugees have been subject to harassment, beatings, forced removal and refoulement, abductions, and extrajudicial killings.

Their suffering is one part of an interwoven and bloody war in Tigray that has internally displaced and negatively affected millions of people within the region, sent thousands more into neighboring Sudan, and resulted in accusations of war crimes and even acts of genocide. This paper focuses specifically on the Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia who have been affected by this conflict.

Background, History of Eritrean Refugees Before Current Conflict

After being under Italian colonial rule and British administrative control, Eritrea was integrated into the Ethiopian federation in 1952.¹ Beginning in 1961, Eritreans waged a 30-year struggle for independence, which climaxed when they defeated the Ethiopian army and seized control of all of Eritrea in 1991.² A United Nations-organized referendum in 1993 resulted in a resounding vote in favor of independence. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a bloody border war between 1998 and 2000 that left tens of thousands of people dead. Isaias Afwerki has been Eritrea's only post-independence president, governing with increasingly autocratic and repressive rule particularly since 2001.³

Eritrean refugees have been fleeing to Ethiopia for more than two decades, with some of them arriving in Tigray in 2000 toward the end of Eritrea and Ethiopia's border war.⁴ Many of these refugees are "young single males who fled Eritrea in fear of persecution and forced indefinite military conscription, arbitrary arrest, and systemic human rights violations."⁵ Thousands of Eritrean secondary school students have been conscripted into the country's national service program, which rights groups say is abusive and can last indefinitely.⁶ Many of these refugees have felt stuck 'in limbo,' unable either to return to Eritrea or to work or move freely within Ethiopia.⁷

In 2019, more than 70,000 Eritrean asylum seekers sought refuge in Ethiopia—an average monthly influx of roughly 6,000 persons, which strained resources.⁸ Most of these new arrivals were placed in existing camps in the Tigray region.⁹ Another 9,463 refugees from Eritrea arrived in the first quarter of 2020, a slower rate than in 2019 but still a challenge for authorities during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Many of the Eritrean child refugees arriving at the camps in Tigray were unaccompanied. According to UNHCR, there are an estimated 180,000 Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia normalized relations with Eritrea in 2018 as the countries signed a historic peace agreement that resulted in Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali winning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.¹¹ But tensions over Tigray erupted in 2020 after regional elections favoring the Tigray People's Liberation Front were considered illegitimate by the central government in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.¹²

Current situation

Ethiopian federal troops moved into the Tigray region in November 2020 after an attack on a military base by Tigrayan forces. Eritrean troops also moved into Tigray in support of its new ally and in opposition to the Tigray government that Eritrea considers a "bitter enemy."¹³ Ethiopian authorities initially denied the presence of Eritrean troops in their country.

The conflict quickly became a full-scale humanitarian and displacement crisis. From early November 2020 to early January 2021, more than 56,000 Ethiopian refugees fled the country—with many of them crossing into neighboring Sudan.¹⁴ By April 2021, more than 1 million people had been displaced, according to the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix.¹⁵ The conflict entered a new phase after Ethiopian troops withdrew from Tigray's capital Mekelle in June 2021, allowing the Tigray Defense Forces to make sweeping advances to reclaim territory. The United Nations World Food Programme said in July 2021 that almost 4 million people need emergency food assistance in Tigray.¹⁶

Eritrean refugees have been targeted and brutalized throughout the conflict. In January 2021, satellite images showed heavy damage at two of the four camps that hosted Eritrean refugees before the war, which UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi called "concrete indications of major violations of international law."¹⁷ When UNHCR and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs aid workers finally reached the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps in March 2021, they found them "completely destroyed, and all the humanitarian facilities looted and vandalized."¹⁸ Roughly 20,000 refugees lived in those two camps before the conflict. In March 2021, UN officials reported that more than 7,000 of those refugees made it to the other two Eritrean refugee camps, Mai Aini and Adi Harush. Another 2,000 reached Shire or Mekelle in the Tigray region, or the Afar region or Addis Ababa elsewhere in Ethiopia.

But the whereabouts of many of the remaining Eritrean refugees from the Hitsats and Shimelba camps are still unknown. The UN said it received "many reliable reports and first-hand accounts of... grave and distressing human rights abuses, including killings, targeted abductions, and forced return of refugees to Eritrea."¹⁹

New concerns about the welfare of Eritrean refugees have been renewed as armed forces move into the areas surrounding the two remaining refugee camps, Mai Aini and Adi Harush. An estimated 24,000 Eritrean refugees are in Mai Aini and Adi Harush, which are in Tigray's Mai Tsebri area.²⁰ UNHCR said in a July 27 statement that their staff had lost all access to these camps over the preceding two weeks. Clean drinking water was reportedly running low, and no health care services were available to refugees trapped in the camps. The UN said at the time the last food distribution to both camps, for rations to last one month, occurred in late June. With the deteriorating security situation around the Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, UNHCR is expediting work on a new refugee camp site at Dabat in the Amhara region.²¹

Another 55,000 Eritrean refugees are still reportedly in the Afar region, which borders Tigray to the east. Armed confrontations close to where these refugees live have also been reported. Humanitarian supplies from the UN and other agencies have been stranded in Semera after the main supply road to Mekelle was blocked. The U.S. State Department has called on all actors in the conflict to cease attacks against Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, as well as the humanitarian organizations trying to aid them.²²

Recommendation

Eritrean refugees in northern Ethiopia, including Tigray, need urgent assistance. They face intimidation, harassment, and potential attacks from armed groups fighting nearby, as well as poor living conditions exacerbated by obstructed humanitarian aid.

They cannot return to Eritrea, considering the repressive nature of the regime as well as dangers that abducted and repatriated refugees from the Hitsats and Shimelba camps are likely facing after their forced return to Eritrea. They also cannot remain in the Tigray region or in northern Ethiopia more generally, where access to humanitarian aid is limited and fighting between Tigrayan forces and Ethiopian regional and federal troops remains a threat to their safety and security.

The international community should prioritize Eritrean refugees for resettlement in a safe third country. The logistical challenges of reaching these refugees and resettling them in more secure territory are staggering. However, as one of the most vulnerable groups in this devastating conflict, Eritrean refugees must be protected and safely resettled for their personal security and wellbeing. Without coordinated and expedited international action toward this goal, more innocent people will be caught in the crossfire and the trauma for this disproportionately young refugee population will only deepen.

USCRI has a long history—nearly four decades— of working with Eritreans fleeing violence and persecution. USCRI board members, senior staff, and policy analysts have visited refugee camps and published several issue papers. In December 2015, USCRI undertook a factfinding mission and published a report titled *Forgotten Refugees: Eritrean Children in Northern Tigray*. As it has done in the past, USCRI will continue to follow the developments in the crisis of Eritreans fleeing violence and persecution.

USCRI is an organization founded in 1911 to protect the rights and address the needs of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide and support their transition to a dignified life.

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The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization dedicated to addressing the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants. Through its network of field offices and affiliates, USCRI provides America's newcomers with a comprehensive package of essential services to meet their basic needs upon arrival. USCRI protects immigrant children who arrive in the U.S. without parents or resources, ensuring that the children receive the legal, social and health services they require. In addition, USCRI works with survivors of human trafficking across a multi-regional network of service providers in every state—providing emergency assistance including: access to housing; healthcare; education; employment opportunities; legal assistance; and language training. USCRI advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants both nationally and globally, helping to drive policies, practices and law.

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