

## Protection For Refugees Needed After Two Years Of War In Northern Ethiopia

*The conflict in northern Ethiopia, which began in earnest on November 3-4, 2020, has displaced millions of people and caused one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The war has featured wide-scale atrocities against displaced persons, such as the disappearance and forced removal of thousands of Eritrean refugees. The Ethiopian state and the UN Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, have failed miserably to uphold protections for those displaced and missing in the two years of fighting in or near Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray.*

*A November 2, 2022, truce between the main warring parties—the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front—represents a potential breakthrough for peace in Africa's second most-populous country. But Ethiopia and the international community face a long road ahead ensuring that adequate protection is provided to those displaced by the war.*

This report will analyze the relevant displacement trends and challenges in the conflict in northern Ethiopia. The report will conclude with recommendations for the international community and United States on policy responses to displacement related to the conflict in and around Tigray—such as:

- Enhanced UHNCR protection for displaced refugees
- Safe resettlement opportunities for Ethiopian, Eritrean refugees in third countries
- Investigations into the disappearance and forced removal of Eritrean refugees
- Strengthening Temporary Protected Status for Ethiopians in the United States
- Expanded Ethiopian, Eritrean refugee admissions into the United States in FY 2023
- Deferred Enforced Departure designation in the United States for Eritrea

### **Humanitarian, displacement situation**

According to recent data from the [World Food Programme](#), 13.6 million people in northern Ethiopia were in need of food assistance, including 5.4 million in Tigray, 1.2 million in Afar, and more than 7 million in Amhara. Delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Tigray region was being threatened “at a time when families are struggling through the ongoing lean season.” About 89 percent of the population, or 5.4 million people, in the region are food insecure. Shortages of fuel and funding have continued to hamper WFP distributions in recent months. Other United Nations agencies and

humanitarian organizations have worked to reach displaced and affected populations throughout the conflict, including:

#### *Internally displaced persons, or IDPs*

In absolute terms, displacement in Ethiopia has mainly occurred within its borders. The [Internal Displacement Monitoring Center](#) found that 3.6 million people were displaced within Ethiopia from conflict and violence in 2021. Tigray saw the most displacements in 2021, but internal displacement was also significant in the Amhara and Afar regions.

#### *Ethiopian refugees in Sudan*

More than 56,000 Ethiopian refugees mostly from Tigray fled into neighboring Sudan within the first two months of the outbreak of the conflict, according to the [UN Refugee Agency](#). Nearly two years later, more than 60,000 refugees remain in eastern Sudan at the Hamdayet transit camp or more long-term refugee camps in Um Rakuba and Tunaydbah. Refugees often do not have access to [adequate food and shelter](#). Flooding events also continually threaten [Um Rakuba and Tunaydbah](#)—prompting calls for more durable solutions for refugees along the Sudanese-Ethiopian border.

#### *Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia*

Thousands of Eritreans had been living in a series of deplorable camps in northern Ethiopia before the recent conflict. An exceptionally young refugee population, [Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia](#) have fled persecution and their country's indefinite mandatory military service for years, with some refugees residing in Ethiopia since the end of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border war in 2000. Some of these camps, Hitsats and Shimelba, were found destroyed in early 2021 with the whereabouts of their inhabitants unknown. Amid the vacuum of information from a communications blackout in the Tigray region, concerning reports of killings, abductions, and forced repatriations of these refugees back to Eritrea have emerged.

With the Eritrean military intervening in the conflict on the side of Ethiopian federal forces, Eritrean refugees have been [a target for all sides of the conflict](#)—by the Eritrean military for fleeing their country of origin and by Tigrayan forces as revenge for atrocities by Eritrean military units. Numerous reports have emerged alleging crimes against humanity committed against Eritrean refugees, who are often considered one of the most vulnerable groups caught in the conflict's crossfire.

### **Recommendations for international actors**

Nearly two years of bloodshed have demonstrated there is no military solution to this conflict. A continuous ceasefire and cessation of hostilities is necessary to reestablishing security and stability for affected Eritrean refugees and IDPs in the

Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions of northern Ethiopia, as well as Ethiopian refugees in Sudan.

In addition to pushing for the November 2, 2022, cessation of hostilities to hold, members of the international community should advocate for:

#### *Enhanced UNHCR protection for displaced refugees*

The UN Refugee Agency must make a [concerted effort to find and offer protection](#) to Eritrean refugees still unaccounted for from the conflict's early days. The Ethiopian federal government and UNHCR have failed to offer protection to the Eritrean refugee population. UNHCR needs to continue to push for continuous, unobstructed humanitarian access to areas "[where Eritreans have fled or been forced to reside.](#)" Protection [needs](#) at the refugee camps in Sudan should also be addressed.

#### *Safe resettlement for Ethiopians, Eritreans in third countries*

Eritrean refugees have been trapped in Ethiopia for years. Ethiopian refugees residing in Sudan face difficult camp conditions and uncertain questions on whether and when they can return to their homes in Tigray and elsewhere. International actors must explore safe third-country resettlement opportunities for these refugees until more assurances are provided for the safe and voluntary return to their areas of origin.

#### *Investigations into disappeared Eritrean refugees*

The forced disappearance of roughly 20,000 Eritrean refugees early in the conflict represents a grave violation of international law that remains relatively unexamined. The relative silence of the international community, including UNHCR, over this chapter of the war must not continue. [As it did in 2021, USCRI calls on the United Nations to investigate](#) the whereabouts and status of these refugees that were under international protection until November 2020. The forced repatriation and disappearance of Eritrean refugees should be of global concern—and the UN's response should reflect the severity of the rights abuses entailed.

### **Recommendations for the United States**

The Biden administration's top foreign policy goal in Ethiopia has long been securing a permanent end to the conflict. In addition to encouraging the continued observance of the cessation of hostilities, the United States can take several steps to improve conditions for Ethiopians and Eritreans affected by the conflict:

#### *Protecting Ethiopians in the United States after TPS designation*

In October 2022, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [announced](#) it would create a new Temporary Protected Status for Ethiopians residing in the United States. The designation—a first for Ethiopia—allows Ethiopians in the United States to remain in

the country and receive employment authorization and protection from deportation. All eligible Ethiopians may benefit from the designation— regardless of their region of origin, even though the conflict has affected different regions of the country in vastly different ways.

With 25,000 to 30,000 Ethiopians potentially eligible to submit TPS applications, DHS should continue its efforts to shorten the processing backlog for TPS applicants. Since recipients' protections and work authorization can only be granted for 18 months at a time, efficient processing for all TPS applications, including those from Ethiopians, is "[critical](#)" for accessing the protections of this designation.

TPS for Ethiopians should also be paired with Special Student Relief, or SSR, for more than 2,000 Ethiopian international students studying in American colleges and universities. The [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#) notes that implementing SSR alongside the TPS designation would ensure flexibility on course loads and off-campus employment that are critical for students to remain enrolled while their countries of origin are threatened by conflict.

#### *Resettling more Ethiopians, Eritreans through USRAP*

Through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, 184 refugees originating from Eritrea and 72 refugees originating from Ethiopia arrived in the [2021 fiscal year](#) from October 2020 to September 2021. In Fiscal Year 2022, the United States admitted 252 refugees from Ethiopia and 352 refugees from Eritrea, according to Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data.

In [a State Department report to Congress](#) this September on refugee admissions, the United States indicated it will increase the Ethiopian refugee admissions target for Fiscal Year 2023 "to provide urgent resettlement to displaced Eritrean and other refugees within Ethiopia and those Ethiopians who have fled as refugees to neighboring countries." The State Department is also expecting a UNHCR proposed Priority-2 designation for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia who were affected by the war. It is not immediately clear how or if that designation is impacted by the November 2, 2022, truce.

With the [higher admissions goal for Ethiopia](#), the potential UNHCR P-2 designation for Eritrean refugees, and the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, the United States must take decisive action this fiscal year to prioritize admitting more Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). After its experiences with special programs for Afghans, Ukrainians, and Venezuelans, the United States must not use humanitarian parole as the mechanism to admit more Ethiopians and Eritreans into the country—as humanitarian parole does not provide a pathway to lasting protections from removal and for work authorization.

## *Deferred Enforced Departure for Eritrea*

Deferred Enforced Departure, or DED, is another form of blanket relief from removal similar to TPS. DED is a [temporary, discretionary, administrative stay of removal](#) granted to eligible individuals from designated countries that—unlike TPS—comes directly from the President’s constitutional powers to conduct foreign relations. While [DED](#) is not a specific immigration status, individuals covered by DED are not subject to removal from the United States.

DED’s protections are triggered when a protected individual is identified for removal. Individuals who benefit from DED are also not required to register for the status with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) unless they are applying for work authorization.

A clear case can be made why it is in the United States’ foreign policy interests to prevent the deportation of Eritreans to [one of the world’s most repressive regimes](#) that also [consistently defends Russia](#) and its unjust invasion of Ukraine. DED is used less frequently than TPS—but Eritrea’s actions within its own borders and in the war of northern Ethiopia justify the extension of protections to individuals originating from Eritrea.

### **Conclusion**

UNHCR and other international actors must step up and offer protection to vulnerable refugees displaced by the conflict in and around Tigray. After its much-needed TPS designation for Ethiopia, the United States also must follow through on increased admissions of affected Ethiopians and Eritreans through USRAP. USCRI will continue to advocate for policies that allow individuals affected by this conflict to resettle in safety and dignity both in the United States and in the Horn of Africa region.

USCRI has a long history of specifically working with Eritreans fleeing violence and persecution—including [a 2015 fact-finding mission](#) to camps in northern Tigray. USCRI will continue to follow the developments affecting this population and advocate for just and inclusive policy solutions in response. For more context on the Eritrean refugee population and the origins of the conflict in northern Ethiopia, read USCRI’s [“Cornered by Conflict”](#) report from August 2021.