

## Unwanted and unprotected: Displaced Eritreans caught by conflict, crisis, and cruelty

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Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers continue to be exposed to horrific human rights violations, such as kidnappings and forced disappearances. They cannot safely return to their home country, which features indefinite mandatory military conscription among other forms of repression. They cannot find safety and security in nearby countries, between targeted violence and harassment by security forces to the threat of forced returns and deportations to Eritrea. They cannot find protection from those tasked to provide it in and around camps established by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

These grave patterns should not be overlooked and must be addressed by host countries and the international community. State authorities and UNHCR must be held accountable for the systematic failures of recent years to protect Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers from forced disappearances, kidnappings, and other breakdowns in protection.

This report provides updates on the situation of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in three host countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. It highlights the vulnerabilities and exposure to human rights violations that these populations face on an ongoing basis and from new sources of insecurity, such as the spiraling conflict gripping Sudan.

To meet the protection needs of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) recommends *neighboring country commitments for protection against non-refoulement, accountability for the forced disappearances of Eritrean refugees, expanded access to asylum in Ethiopia, and increased third-country resettlement, including through U.S. refugee admissions.*

### Ethiopia

On July 13, [a group of United Nations \(UN\) experts condemned](#) Ethiopia's "summary expulsion of hundreds of Eritreans" at the end of June 2023. The experts noted several cases of family separation following these mass deportations to Ethiopia, including parents being forced back to Eritrea and children left behind in Ethiopia. "There is no information on the fate or whereabouts of those deported since their return to Eritrea," the experts wrote.

The report adds to the overwhelming amount of evidence of grave patterns of human rights violations committed against [forcibly returned Eritreans in northern Ethiopia](#), including torture, ill treatment, enforced disappearance, trafficking, and arbitrary detention. Shortly after the onset of the war in northern Ethiopia in November 2020, thousands of Eritrean refugees were [forcibly disappeared or returned to Eritrea](#) with little information as to their fate.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [could not access](#) the northern Tigray camps of Hitsats and Shimelba from November 2020 to March 2021—returning only to find the camps deserted and destroyed. Some Eritrean refugees who lived there before the Tigray conflict remain unaccounted for to this day. Contemporaneous investigations by [organizations such as Human Rights Watch](#) shed some light on the human rights abuses that likely occurred in the Hitsats and Shimelba camps. But the full scale of violations remains untallied and not sufficiently addressed by UNHCR or federal and regional authorities in Ethiopia.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea [assesses](#) that the [cessation of hostilities in Tigray](#) has led to a relative improvement in the condition and security of Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees. However, needs remain high for both Tigrayans and Eritrean refugees residing in Tigray— particularly after a pause in [U.S.](#) and [international](#) food aid because of diverted assistance. “Of note, the peace agreement does not contain any specific provisions about the protection of Eritrean refugees, whether in Tigray or in other regions of Ethiopia,” the Special Rapporteur wrote in his May report, calling on Ethiopian federal authorities to provide Eritrean populations with “protection against refoulement, access to humanitarian assistance and basic services, and redress and reparation for losses that they have incurred in the camps during the armed conflict in Tigray.”

More than 22,000 refugees and asylum seekers now live in [the Alemwach camp](#) in the nearby Amhara region— after many Eritreans opted to flee [insecurity in the Mai Ani and Adi Harush camps](#) in southern Tigray. This spontaneous relocation involved “difficult transit.” Other refugees were relocated to Alemwach by UNHCR, the Ethiopian Refugee and Returnee Service (RSS), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

## **Sudan**

Eritrean refugees faced challenging living conditions in Sudan before the current crisis. UNHCR [reported before the conflict](#) that the majority— 83 percent —of Eritrean refugees in Sudan lived in refugee camps in the eastern part of the country, primarily in the Kassala state on the Eritrean-Sudanese border.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea [found that](#) hundreds of Eritreans were arbitrarily arrested and detained between April 2022 and April 2023. From August 2022 to March 2023, in particular, Sudanese security services “intensified immigration control operations” targeting Eritreans in Khartoum, Sudan’s capital that hosted the third most Eritrean refugees after the Kassala and Gedaref states. Refugees were frequently arrested during raids and detained on the grounds they lacked identification documents, residence permits, or valid permits to move outside the refugee camps in eastern Sudan. This reportedly led to an atmosphere of fear among the Eritrean refugee population in Khartoum, “in hiding and too afraid to leave their houses.”

Like other previously displaced populations in the country, Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Sudan have been exposed to insecurity since [fighting erupted](#) between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in April 2023. Numerous Eritrean refugees have [reportedly disappeared](#) while returning to Kassala, “raising fears that they have either been captured by Eritrea’s authoritarian government or by human traffickers.” Indeed, [Eritrean activists fear](#) that thousands of Eritreans have been forcibly deported over the border to the town of Teseney in western Eritrea. With UNHCR assistance to Eritreans confined to the camps in Kassala, “many are being forced to choose between accessing aid in an area where they risked being kidnapped or relocating where help is not available,” Al Jazeera [reported in May](#).

## **Egypt**

Forcibly displaced Eritreans also reside in Egypt by seeking refuge there or remaining after failing to continue on to Israel or across the eastern Mediterranean Sea, according to the [America Team for Displaced Eritreans](#).

Egypt has also been [previously condemned](#) for its treatment of Eritrean asylum seekers, including continued deportations to Eritrea. “Despite his continued engagement with the Egyptian authorities, Egypt has continued to expel groups of Eritreans without conducting individual assessments of the risks,” the Special Rapporteur wrote in his [most recent report](#). “Upon their return to Eritrea, deportees face the risk of persecution and of being subjected to human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, forced labor, and forced conscription.” Several deported Eritreans have also not been seen or heard from since their return— meaning they may be arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared.

## **Recommendations**

To offer protection owed to forcibly displaced Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers under international humanitarian law, USCRI recommends:

*Protection against refoulement:* Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, and other host states must respect the international norm of non-refoulement and commit to not deporting or involuntarily returning Eritrean refugees or asylum seekers back to Eritrea.

*Accountability for the forced disappearances of Eritrean refugees:* The U.S. government and international organizations [should](#) “support accountability for grave human rights abuses by Ethiopia, Eritrea, and armed groups in Tigray and other regions, including... kidnappings of refugees.” UNHCR should also provide candid assessments of the protection breakdowns that have led to forced disappearances and kidnappings of Eritreans in and around camp settings in northern Ethiopia and eastern Sudan.

*Open access to asylum in Ethiopia:* The Ethiopian Refugee and Returnee Service (RSS) stopped registering newly arrived asylum seekers in March 2020, preventing them from accessing the asylum process and applying for protection in Ethiopia. The UN experts

note this lack of registration and accompanying documentation “places refugees and asylum-seekers in a situation of heightened vulnerability and hinders their access to human rights.” UNHCR and international stakeholders must press Ethiopia to address asylum access issues that continue to hinder protection for forcibly displaced Eritreans.

*Third-country resettlement through USRAP:* The United States should continue to ramp up its use of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to resettle forcibly displaced Eritreans. On this front, some progress has been made—with 718 Eritrean refugee admissions so far in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, more than double the Eritrean admissions of FY 2022 and almost four times those in FY 2021. Through targeted circuit rides and increased processing, the United States can entrench this momentum for the long haul to meet the clear need for third-country resettlement as a durable solution for forcibly displaced Eritreans.

## **Conclusion**

Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers have been repeatedly “[cornered by conflict](#),” from the war in Tigray to the current crisis in Sudan. Forcibly displaced Eritreans represent one of the most vulnerable populations in the Horn of Africa, caught between their home country’s repression and aggressive actions to repatriate them and the outbreak of conflicts around them by competing armed actors in Tigray and Sudan.

Yet, protection and durable solutions for this displaced and marginalized group remain woefully insufficient. For example, Ethiopia and Sudan were considered among the world’s neglected displacement crises in 2022 by [Norwegian Refugee Council](#). Even among these [underfunded responses and underreported crises](#), the plight of Eritreans has been overlooked, even when compared to other overlooked needs.

This status quo is untenable and unacceptable.

Host states such as Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan can and must do better to respect international humanitarian law regarding forcibly displaced Eritrean populations in their territory. UNHCR and other international actors must also bolster protections for this population and provide strategic leadership on closing this wide protection gap for one of Earth’s most vulnerable groups.

USCRI has long been a champion for Eritrean populations affected by violence and persecution— including a [2015 fact-finding mission](#) to refugee camps in northern Tigray with the America Team for Displaced Eritreans and other non-governmental organizations. USCRI will continue to follow the developments affecting this population and advocate for just, inclusive policy solutions in partnership with other organizations.