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July 26, 2021

Ann Allen Encontre
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Transmitted via email ann@unhcr.org

Re: Preliminary Findings on events in Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps

Dear Ms. Encontre,

I write on behalf of Human Rights Watch to share the findings of our research on events in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, and to request your response to several questions. I would also be grateful for the opportunity to discuss our research and these questions in a call over the next two weeks at your convenience.

Please find below a summary of our preliminary findings and a list of questions.

Preliminary Findings

Between January and June 2021, Human Rights Watch spoke with 28 Eritrean refugees, most former residents of Hitsats camp but also 5 from Shimelba, as well as 2 local residents from Hitsats who survived or witnessed serious abuses by both Eritrean government forces and local Tigrayan militias between mid-November 2020 and early January 2021. Human Rights Watch also analyzed satellite imagery to document the physical destruction in the camps.

Hitsats

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that on November 19, 2020 Eritrean forces arrived in Hitsats and clashed with the remaining local Tigrayan militia fighters in Hitsats town, killing several local residents, before occupying the town and the refugee camp. The Tigrayan forces retreated. For two days, Eritrean forces, joined by some refugees, pillaged Hitsats town.

On November 23, local Tigrayan militiamen, apparently in retaliation for Eritrean abuses, including killings in the neighboring village of Enda Mikael, entered the camp and attacked refugees near the Orthodox church. Nine refugees were killed and 17 badly injured. Clashes between the local militia forces and Eritrean soldiers ensued, lasting several hours. In the aftermath, Eritrean forces detained approximately two dozen refugees, including members of the refugee leadership, and held them handcuffed for two days in the camp before taking them away in military vehicles. They also took the 17 injured refugees from the camp. At least one was taken back to Eritrea for treatment, and it seems likely that the others were also taken to Eritrea but we have not been able to confirm this.

The Eritreans forces left in early December. Tigrayan forces returned on December 5, shooting into the camp and sending hundreds of refugees fleeing. Some of the refugees who fled were attacked, detained, and subjected to sexual violence by Tigrayan militiamen in the following days, notably around Zelazle and Ziban Gedena, north of Hitsats.

The Tigrayan militia fighters marched many refugees back to Hitsats, killing some refugees who got tired along the way. Once back in Hitsats, Tigrayan special forces, Tigrayan militia fighters and members of an unidentified armed Eritrean group detained hundreds of refugees in a building under harsh conditions, apparently in an effort to identify refugees who had collaborated with the Eritrean forces. These forces prohibited refugees from leaving the camp, justifying this as a way of protecting them from further violence, but forcing them to survive without food provisions, clean water, or medical supplies for almost a month.

On January 4, following heavy clashes near the camp, the Tigrayan forces pulled out of Hitsats and Eritrean forces returned and ordered all refugees still remaining to leave along the main road towards Eritrea. Between January 5 and 8, key infrastructure in the camp was burned, leaving significant parts of the camp in ruins.

Most refugees then faced a days-long trek to the Ethiopian towns of Sheraro and Badme, both under Eritrean control at the time, with little water or food. Once there, refugees told Human Rights Watch that many felt they had no choice but to return back to Eritrea in order to survive. Those with the means to pay for transport fled back into the Tigray region.

Shimelba

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that in November, Eritrean government forces detained approximately 20 refugees – men and women, including several community leaders – from their shelters in Shimelba camp, and held them in the camp for a day or two before taking them away in Eritrean vehicles to an unknown location.

On December 7, the Eritrean forces also reportedly executed six or seven Ethiopians in the vicinity of the camp, creating considerable fear among the refugees. Following this incident, many camp residents fled Shimelba towards Sheraro. Refugees said they faced significant

pressure to return to Eritrea from Eritrean forces who were in control of Sheraro town when they arrived.

Hundreds of refugees managed to return to Shimelba. In the meantime, the Tigrayan forces – militia fighters and TPLF special forces – had occupied the Shimelba camp, prohibited refugees from leaving, and forced the refugees to provide them with food and provisions. The refugees remaining in the camp struggled to survive.

On December 17, heavy fighting took place in and around the camp between the Tigrayan forces and Eritrean forces. Three residents said that at least six refugees were killed during the fighting.

Questions for UNHCR

For each of the camps, we would appreciate answers to the following questions in as much detail as possible, as well as any other information that will help shed light on the events.

1. How many refugees were registered in Shimelba, Hitsats, Mai Aini, and Adi Harush in October 2020?
2. How many of the Eritrean refugees believed to be present in Tigray at the time the conflict broke out in November (including in camps, outside of camps, and at the Endabaguna reception center) has UNHCR been able to account for? How many are still unaccounted for? Please provide as much detail as possible their current known locations.
3. Has UNHCR been able to follow up on the situation of dozens of refugee community members arrested in both Hitsats and Shimelba in late November?
4. Have you been able to confirm how many Eritrean refugees were killed in Hitsats and Shimelba between November and January?
5. Have you been able to confirm the number of Eritrean refugees who have returned to Eritrea since November?
6. Why was UNHCR unable to access the camps before March 26? Please spell out the role of ARRA in negotiations to access the camps?
7. Kindly confirm the number of refugees who had fled fighting in Tigray and were then forced by Ethiopian authorities to return from Addis Ababa to Tigray in December and early January 2021? How many have since been accounted for in Mai Aini and Adi Harush, respectively? What options have been provided to them?
8. We understand that UNHCR is negotiating with the federal government to provide support to refugees who have fled to Addis Ababa and other urban areas. Who would be eligible for such assistance (those on temporary status and/or with official Out of Camp Permits)? What would this package include? What have been the obstacles so far to rolling this out?
9. What update do you have in terms of access to and the situation in Adi Harush and Mai Aini? Which forces have been providing security at the camp and has that changed? Are forces currently occupying the camp? If so, which forces? What is hampering access?

10. Prior to July 2021, has UNHCR taken any measures in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps to prepare for the eventuality of such events? If so, could you explain the steps that were taken?
11. What does UNHCR want to happen to help protect the Eritrean refugees who remain in Ethiopia today? What recent steps has UNHCR taken to achieve this?

We plan to release a report on these findings in the coming weeks and would greatly appreciate your response – in a call or in writing – **by August 6.**

[Respond here](#) or [contact us](#) if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Laetitia Bader
Horn of Africa director,
Africa division, Human Rights Watch