

350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299
Tel: +1-212-290-4700
Fax: +1-212-736-1300; 917-591-3452

August 28, 2021

Tesfahun Gobezay
Director General
Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA)
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia



HRW.org

Africa Division

Mausi Segun, Executive Director
Ida Sawyer, Deputy Director

Carine Kaneza Nantulya, Advocacy Director

Laetitia Bader, Horn Director
Corinne Dufka, Associate Director, Sahel
Dewa Mavinga, Associate Director, Southern Africa
Lewis Mudge, Central Africa Director
Otsieno Namwaya, East Africa Director

Najma Abdi, Coordinator
Ilaria Allegrozzi, Senior Researcher
Aoife Croucher, Associate
Clémentine de Montjoye, Researcher
Carine Dikiefu Banona, Junior Researcher
Anietie Ewang, Researcher
Thomas Fessy, Senior Researcher
Zenaida Machado, Senior Researcher
Tanya Magaisa, Associate
Oryem Nyeko, Researcher
Mohamed Osman, Assistant Researcher
Nyagoah Tut Pur, Researcher
Jean-Sébastien Sépulchre, Officer
Jim Wormington, Senior Researcher

Africa Advisory Committee

Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, Co-chair
Joel Motley, Co-chair
Akwas Aidoo
Lishan Aklog
Fareeda Banda
Didier Claes
John Githongo
Susan Kane
Samuel Murumba
Muna Ndulo
Amy Rao
Dr. Robin Renee Sanders
Amy Towers
Julie-Anne Uggla
Joanna Weschler
Bruce Rabb

Human Rights Watch

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director

Deputy Executive Directors

Michele Alexander, Development and Global Initiatives
Emma Daly, Media (Acting)
Barbara Pirto, Operations (Acting)
Bruno Stagno Ugarte, Advocacy

Tirana Hassan, Chief Programs Officer
Colin Mincy, Chief People Officer
Dinah PoKempner, General Counsel
James Powell, Chief Technology Officer
James Ross, Legal and Policy Director

Board of Directors

Amy Rao, Co-Chair
Neil Rimer, Co-Chair

Transmitted via email

Re: Findings on events in Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps

Dear Director General,

I write on behalf of Human Rights Watch to share the preliminary findings of our research on events in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, and to request your response to several questions by September 8.

Human Rights Watch is an international human rights organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights abuses in over 90 countries worldwide. We have carried out research in Ethiopia and the Horn more broadly for more than 20 years and continue to research and report on important human rights concerns.

Between January and August 2021, Human Rights Watch spoke with 28 Eritrean refugees, including 23 former residents of Hitsats camp and 5 former residents from Shimelba camp, 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.

Human Rights Watch will be publishing a report on these findings and as we strive to reflect all perspectives in our research and publications, we would appreciate your response to the below questions and any other information you would like to provide.

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

We would be grateful if you could respond by September 8 to allow us to reflect your response in our upcoming report.

Sincerely,

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

Annex I: Preliminary Findings

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. Clashes between the local militia forces and Eritrean soldiers ensued, lasting several hours. Nine refugees were killed and 17 were badly injured that morning.

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 Eritrean forces left Hitsats 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, 2021, 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, others went to Eritrea.

Shimelba

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that in November 2020, Eritrean government forces detained approximately 20 refugees – men and women, including several community leaders – 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 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 who remained 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.

Annex II: Questions for ARRA

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 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 ARRA been able to account for? How many are still unaccounted for?
2. Have you been able to confirm the number of Eritrean refugees who have returned to Eritrea since November?
3. In December 2020 and January 2021, ARRA returned to Tigray refugees who had fled fighting in Tigray to Addis Ababa. Please can you spell out how many refugees were returned and what options were provided to them, including for those who refused to return? How many have since been accounted for in Mai Aini and Adi Harush, respectively?
4. Could you explain why UN agencies were not able to access Shimelba and Hitsats until March 2021?
5. We understand that since August 4, 2021, ARRA, with support from UNHCR, has been issuing temporary identification documents to refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba who have sought refuge in Addis Ababa. Who is eligible for these documents? What assistance will they be eligible for? How long will the temporary identification cards be valid for? What will happen to refugees whose identity papers are missing?
6. What update do you have in terms of access to and the situation in Adi Harush and Mai Aini camps in the Tigray region? Are forces currently occupying the camps? If so, which forces? Is ARRA able to access the camps?
7. What does ARRA want to happen to help protect the Eritrean refugees who remain in Ethiopia today? What recent steps has ARRA taken to achieve this, including in terms of ensuring that refugees can safely relocate to the Amhara region?