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**August 31, 2021**

Embassy and Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea  
Rue de Lausanne 80  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Transmitted via email

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

Dear First Secretary Adem Osman,

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 in Ethiopia's Tigray region, and to request for your response to several questions by September 10, 2021.

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 on Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa 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, as well as local residents from Hitsats, who survived or witnessed serious abuses by both Eritrean government forces and local Tigrayan militia fighters 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 10, 2021, to allow us to reflect your response in our upcoming report.

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Sincerely,

Laetitia Bader  
Director, Horn of Africa  
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. Witnesses described how for two days, Eritrean forces, joined by some refugees, pillaged Hitsats town.

On November 23, local Tigrayan militiamen, apparently in retaliation for Eritrean abuses, 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.

Interviewees said that Eritrean forces left Hitsats in early December.

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. Two witnesses saw Eritrean forces destroying parts of the camp.

Most refugees then faced a day-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 go back to Eritrea in order to survive. Those with the means to pay for transport fled back into the Tigray region, while 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 Government of Eritrea**

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. Could you state when Eritrean forces arrived and left Hitsats and Shimelba camps between November 2020 and January 2021?
2. Could you provide details on the number of registered refugees from the Tigray region who have returned to Eritrea since November 2020? What was the process for their return? How have you ensured they receive necessary assistance?
3. Have you investigated reports that Eritrean forces committed abuses in and around the Hitsats and Shimelba camps? If so, who is carrying out these investigations, and what is the status of these investigations?
4. Could you account for the whereabouts of the dozens of Eritrean refugees whom Eritrean forces allegedly detained in Hitsats and Shimelba in November 2020?
5. If true, why did Eritrean forces destroy parts of Hitsats camp in January 2021?
6. What steps did Eritrean forces take to allow humanitarian access to Shimelba and Hitsats while the forces were occupying these camps? Could you explain why UN agencies allegedly were not able to access Shimelba and Hitsats camps between November 2020 and March 2021?