

# Nowhere to Run: Eritrean Refugees in Tigray

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Cover Photo Caption: A woman looks on as she is surrounded by other women at the compound of the Agda Hotel, in the city of Semera, Afar region, Ethiopia, on February 14, 2022. Thousands of Eritrean refugees, shell-shocked and separated from loved ones, fled on foot through harsh terrain to escape artillery and gunfire. Photo by EDUARDO SOTERAS/AFP via Getty Images.

# Introduction

The humanitarian situation in Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray is nothing short of abysmal. Atrocities amounting to [war crimes](#) have led to the forced displacement of nearly [2.5 million](#) people inside Ethiopia and into neighboring states. The Ethiopian government has [blocked](#) virtually all food and medical shipments into Tigray, using food as a weapon of war. With starvation deaths mounting each day and as many as [900,000](#) people in famine conditions, there are fears that the current situation in Ethiopia will mirror the Great Famine of the 1980s, where over [1 million](#) people starved to death.

Humanitarian actors, desperate to deliver life-saving aid, are unable to access those most in need. Ethiopian authorities are enforcing a communications blackout, and Ethiopian soldiers and rebels are targeting aid workers. Across three regions in Ethiopia, the UN now estimates some [9 million](#) people need food assistance.

The entire population of Tigray and many parts of neighboring Amhara and Afar are suffering greatly. Among these, one vulnerable group is getting lost. Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia have received little attention or assistance despite facing unique risks. They fled one of the worst human rights situations in the world and are now being targeted, killed, kidnapped, tortured, subjected to discrimination, and otherwise abused in Ethiopia. Like Tigrayans, Eritrean refugees are also suffering from the food and medicine blockade.

Neither the Ethiopian state nor any other armed group are protecting Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. The UN has been unable to guarantee their safety. Indeed, in early 2021, Eritrean troops destroyed two Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray, dispersing approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees. In January 2022, refugees were killed by airstrikes that hit refugee camps. The UN and other aid actors have routinely been unable to reach the camps for weeks or even months at a time. Put simply, Ethiopia is no longer a safe country for Eritrean refugees.

Broadly speaking, all parties to the conflict need to participate in an inclusive peace process, and the humanitarian blockade of Tigray must be lifted immediately. Neighboring states, the African Union, financing institutions like the World Bank, and other states, including the United States, Turkey, China, and the United Arab Emirates, must push for an immediate ceasefire, full aid access, peace talks, and the respect of human rights for all inside Ethiopia. Fighting groups should never target civilians, including refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs).

Specific to Eritrean refugees, pressure must be brought to bear on Ethiopia to meet its obligation to protect refugees on its territory. Ethiopia should demand that Eritrean troops withdraw from the conflict and not have contact with or attack Eritrean refugees, and the Human Rights Council should investigate human rights abuses and kidnappings of refugees by Eritrean troops and other armed groups.

For its part, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should reconsider moving refugees to newly erected camps within easy reach of active conflict zones, instead focusing its efforts on helping Eritrean refugees find areas of refuge that provide greater safety, as well as durable solutions to their displacement. Indeed, it should work with donor states like the United States to offer resettlement as quickly as possible to those Eritrean refugees who are of greatest vulnerability and who may be interested in resettlement options. For Eritrean refugees who wish to stay in Ethiopia, UNHCR and Ethiopia should work with all relevant stakeholders to provide safe passage out of conflict zones to other parts of the country, including Addis Ababa. The UN should also work

with neighboring states like Sudan and Kenya to prepare to welcome Eritrean refugees trying to leave Ethiopia and unable to find refuge elsewhere.

The tragedy in Ethiopia, and the famine in Tigray in particular, over the last year was described by the UN's Martin Griffiths as a "[stain on our conscience](#)." Overlooking the needs of some of the most vulnerable caught up in the crisis must add insult to injury, especially as it is clear that Ethiopia is no longer an adequate refuge for those fleeing Eritrea.



*The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. © OCHA*

Source: UN OCHA

## Context

### Overview of the Conflict and Humanitarian Situation

In November 2020, rising tensions between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy and Tigrayan regional leadership culminated in an attack by Tigrayan forces on a federal military base in Tigray. Prime Minister Abiy responded with a military offensive on Tigray, and fighting quickly spiraled to include Tigray's armed forces, the Ethiopian army, Amharan militia, and Eritrean forces. The fighting



remained largely in Tigray, and was accompanied by [massacres, torture, kidnapping, widespread rape as a weapon, and the destruction of medical facilities](#) and infrastructure. Banking and telecommunications were blocked, farms destroyed, livestock slaughtered, and a range of other human rights violations occurred over the next eight months. In addition, widespread looting continues to prevent people from receiving desperately needed food and medicine, and a mix of indiscriminate attacks and targeted violence by all parties has led to the deaths of [some 25 aid workers over the last year](#).

In June of 2021, Tigrayan forces recaptured much of Tigray, and then pressed into Amhara and [toward Ethiopia's capital](#), Addis Ababa. Toward the end of 2021, Ethiopia regained territory with the help of [drones](#) from other states, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Tigrayan forces, perhaps responding to international pressure or in order to regroup, abruptly [returned](#) to Tigray and called for immediate humanitarian access. To date, the fighting continues, and Ethiopian forces continue to block access to those in need.

The World Food Program recently [reported](#) that its operations would grind to a halt as fuel, funding, and stock are running out. They also report a record [9.4 million](#) people in need of humanitarian food assistance in Ethiopia. Starvation deaths are now being reported with somewhere between [425 and 1,201](#) people dying of hunger each day. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) report that the population—children in particular—are too malnourished to receive vaccines. Other reports depict displaced people [eating leaves to survive](#). And a recent UN [report](#) noted an all-time low for food distribution in Tigray: supply stock, including therapeutic nutrition supplies to treat severe acute malnutrition, and fuel have almost entirely been depleted.



Thus far, international actors have been unable to stop the conflict or convince the government of Ethiopia to lift the blockade. For their parts, United Nations and African Union peacemaking efforts have gained little traction, and the United States, EU, and other donor states continue to push for peace talks. Other influential states, like China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates may also have opportunities to push Ethiopia to end the conflict.

## Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia

Eritrean refugees are among the most vulnerable populations affected by the atrocities, displacement, and deteriorating humanitarian situation in northern Ethiopia. Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have sought refuge in Ethiopia in recent decades, and the country currently has some 149,000 Eritrean refugees. They have fled some of the worst human rights conditions in the world. For example, Eritrea ranks even lower than North Korea in the World Press Freedom Index

of 2021. Freedom of worship, widespread persecution, forced military conscription, and other widespread rights violations are common. Those who speak out or are even suspected of opposition to government policy have been jailed for years, tortured, executed, and disappeared.

Eritreans who have fled to Ethiopia face similar challenges to refugees from other countries, like South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen. Ethiopia hosts 800,000 refugees, one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Most refugees are required to live in the camps, which are jointly run by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Ethiopia's Refugee and Returnees Services (RSS) (formerly known as, ARRA, or the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs). Until 2020, [very few refugees had the legal right to work](#).

Before the war, many Eritreans in Ethiopia would migrate to Sudan, and some would travel onward with hopes of reaching Europe via Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. On these routes, many have been trafficked, tortured, and/or sold into slavery. Of those who remained in Ethiopia, most resided in Tigray, largely due to geography (Tigray borders Eritrea) and cultural and linguistic similarities. Nearly all Eritrean refugees in Tigray were clustered in four camps: Hitsats, Shimelba, Mai Aini, and Adi Harush.

## The Needs of Eritreans Still Inside Tigray and Amhara

### Nowhere to Run

Since the start of the conflict, both Eritrean forces and Tigrayans have targeted Eritrean refugees—the former targeting Eritrean refugees as vengeance for having fled their native country (in many cases to avoid conscription), and the latter as vengeance for the atrocities Eritrean forces have committed against Tigrayans. As Human Rights Watch's Laetitia Bader [indicates](#), "Eritrean refugees have been attacked both by the very forces they fled back home and by Tigrayan fighters...The horrific killings, rapes, and looting against Eritrean refugees in Tigray are evident war crimes." Eritrean refugees have also been [scapegoated](#) by Tigrayans who have suffered abuses by Eritrean soldiers. And they have been [targeted](#) by those wanting to attack Tigrayans, as many speak Tigrinya and may easily be mistaken for Tigrayan Ethiopians.

Some of the fiercest attacks have been carried out by Eritrean troops who crossed into Ethiopia to join the fight. In January 2021, [satellite images](#) revealed that Eritrean troops had destroyed the two northern Eritrean camps of Hitsats and Shimelba. These camps were home to approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees. It was difficult to confirm the state of these camps for weeks and even months, as telecommunications were cut in Tigray, misinformation was common, and the conflict was raging.

The UN was finally able to gain access in March 2021, and [confirmed](#) that the camps were completely destroyed, with all occupants "scattered" and all humanitarian facilities "looted and vandalised." Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that these camps were directly targeted by "belligerent Eritrean and Tigrayan forces" who occupied the camps and committed abuses. Most residents are believed to have fled, but some Eritrean refugees were killed, and many more – potentially [thousands](#) – were kidnapped back into Eritrea.

Cross-border attacks on camps are not unheard of in many refugee situations, particularly along porous borders with tense security situations and ongoing conflict. However, the wholesale destruction of camps and the large-scale kidnapping from a country of asylum back into the country of origin is quite rare, and certainly cause for alarm. Indeed, Eritrea has taken advantage of the conflict in Ethiopia to [settle old scores](#)—and Ethiopia has permitted it. A recent Reuters report [describes](#) one kidnapping instance where soldiers detained a group of refugee leaders, pinning their elbows behind their backs and holding them for days in a church. They were then taken away in trucks and have not been heard from since.

## **Multiple Displacements, Unsafe Encampment, Lack of Assistance and Protection**

Since the destruction of the northern camps of Hitsats and Shimelba that displaced 20,000 Eritrean refugees early in the conflict, and attacks on Eritrean refugees and the civilian population elsewhere in Tigray, thousands more Eritrean refugees have been repeatedly displaced. Some have moved multiple times in Tigray. Others have sought safety in Addis Ababa. In one instance in December 2020, Eritrean refugees who had reached Addis Ababa, were [forcibly escorted back](#) to Tigray. To date, aid groups are unclear of what has happened to many of the 20,000 Eritrean refugees who left Hitsats and Shimelba.

Some Eritrean refugees managed to reach other camps. Approximately [5,000](#) made their way to Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps as of February 2021. However, their situation in these camps remains precarious. Since June 2021, UNHCR and other aid agencies have routinely been cut off from these camps, blocked from delivering food, medicine, and other assistance for weeks or even months at a time. In January 2022, UNHCR issued a [statement](#) indicating that its staff had been unable to reach Mai Aini or Adi Harush for three weeks. When UN staff finally reached the camps, they found “refugees scared and struggling to get enough to eat, lacking medicine and with little or no access to clean water.” They highlighted more than 20 preventable deaths due to the lack of medicine and health services.

Attacks have also [targeted](#) refugees in the camps. Some faced vengeance attacks by Tigrayans. In a [recent airstrike](#) by Ethiopian force, three refugees in Mai Aini – two of whom were children – were killed. Even last July, UNHCR [raised the alarm](#) about the safety of Eritreans in camps in Tigray, citing concern that 24,000 Eritrean refugees in Mai Aini and Adi Harush faced intimidation, harassment and were cut off from assistance. And in February 2022, [thousands of Eritrean refugees fled](#) Barahle Camp in Afar region after the camp was attacked and refugees killed and kidnapped.

Despite these dangers, UNHCR is working with the Ethiopian government to [build new shelter and camps](#) for Eritrean refugees near Dabat and Alemwach in the Amhara region. Some refugees approve of this relocation, if only because they are desperate to get out of harm’s way. However, many others do not feel they will be safe anywhere in Ethiopia, let alone in these camps. Eritrean refugees are commonly mistaken for or associated with Tigrayans, who face threats and discrimination across Ethiopia. Or they are [associated](#) by vengeful Tigrayans with Eritrean soldiers, who have been implicated in massacres, mass rape, and other abuses in Tigray. Host Tigrayan communities that had lived peacefully with Eritrean refugees for years now fear that Eritrean refugees cannot be trusted.

## The Needs of Eritreans in Sudan

While most Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia are believed to have remained in the country since the violence began in November 2020, some have fled to Sudan, joining a larger, older caseload of Eritrean refugees there. The newly arrived Eritrean refugees are among some [55,000](#) Ethiopian refugees who made their way into Sudan in the early months of the conflict. Over 2021, the border between Ethiopia and Sudan became increasingly difficult and dangerous to cross, and rising tensions stemming from [longstanding grievances](#) between Ethiopia and Sudan make it dangerous for refugees to flee to safety. In addition, Sudan's coup in October 2021 and its aftermath have added financial and political strains, with potential impacts on its overall capacity to assist refugees.

In the early months of the conflict, Sudan received praise for its relative openness, despite already hosting a protracted refugee population of some 1 million people from various countries in the region. However, by June 2021, donors were [raising concerns](#) about the response by international organizations, taking the rare step of sending a letter to UNHCR to express frustration over a “lack of leadership and failing to act on prior donor warnings about gaps and delays in providing aid.”<sup>1</sup> They cited a range of concerns for newly arriving refugees in Sudan, including risks of trafficking, armed recruitment, and sexual violence. *The New Humanitarian* Africa Correspondent and Editor

Philip Kleinfeld's exclusive [reporting](#) on the matter cited senior aid officials in the camps as decrying a response that was “...the worst they had seen in their careers.”

Some of the concerns related to hasty efforts to find suitable sites for camps – a common struggle in any emergency displacement setting. The sites of Sudan's more recently established camps, particularly Um Rakuba and Tunaydbah, are prone to weather risks, including severe storms, flooding, windstorms, and other [hazards](#). A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report highlights that one camp was built on “black cotton” soil that is hard and cracks during the dry season and becomes wet, sticky, and muddy during the rainy season.

Many have chosen to seek a life elsewhere, rather than languish in camps. One refugee, discussing others he knew who left for Libya [stated](#), “They know the danger. I tried to tell them many times, but we cannot blame them. Look at this place—they go out of pure despair.” Indeed, many risk the dangers of smugglers and traffickers who are well-known to eastern Sudan, and profit heavily from desperate migrants and refugees trying to get to northern Africa and Europe. Reports indicate a threefold [increase](#) in smuggling since the start of the war. Eritrean refugees and others smuggled and trafficked have long been subjected to rape, torture, extortion, enslavement and detention, and in recent years reports of kidnapping refugees and trafficking them have been [reported](#) by the UN and rights groups. And among those that do reach northern Africa, many die trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in attempts to get to Europe.

Some of those who are smuggled or trafficked, including Eritrean refugees, are children who were separated during the conflict. Many still do not know what has happened to family members they lost during the fighting. While aid agencies have conducted family reunification where possible, unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and smuggling. Indeed, the trafficking route from eastern Sudan to northern Africa is a common and dangerous pathway for Sub-Saharan Africans trying to reach Europe.

1 Donors who signed the letter included ambassadors from Canada, Germany, Norway and Switzerland, and officials from the UK, US, and EU. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2021/07/07/exclusive-donors-accuse-un-mismanaging-tigray-refugee-response>



## Conclusion

True protection of civilians, including refugees in Ethiopia, will come only with the cessation of hostilities, lifting of barriers to humanitarian aid, and engagement in meaningful and inclusive dialogue. Any sustainable peace will also need to include measures of accountability for atrocities that have taken place. States with influence, including those in the region, as well as the United Arab Emirates, China, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States must press Ethiopia to pursue that path to peace. In the meantime, these actors, working with UNHCR, must take steps to ensure that those among the most vulnerable, including Eritrean refugees, have some path to safety. Ethiopia's allowance of Eritrean troops to operate in Ethiopia, direct attacks on refugees, and blocking of humanitarian assistance to refugee camps makes Ethiopia an unsuitable place for Eritrean refugees to access their rights, seek refuge, and find durable solutions to their displacement.

## Recommendations

### **The Government of Ethiopia must:**

- Cease committing atrocities, end its humanitarian blockade, and uphold its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.
- Provide protection and assistance to refugees on its territory, in accordance with its domestic law and international laws and never target refugees, IDPs, or other civilians during conflict
- Work with international humanitarian organizations to undertake concerted efforts to find and offer protection to Eritrean refugees who may be missing within Ethiopia.
- Work with UNHCR and IOM to provide for Eritreans who wish to stay in Ethiopia safe passage out of conflict zones to other parts of the country, including Addis Ababa.
- Acknowledge the ongoing presence of Eritrean troops and demand that Eritrean troops withdraw from the conflict and Ethiopian territory.

### **The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should:**

- Make a concerted effort to find and offer protection to missing Eritrean refugees.
- Work with the Ethiopian government to avoid establishing camps where there is no reasonable expectation that they will offer acceptable levels of safety and protection. Consult more widely with refugees on their views on safety and the building of new camps and solicit guarantees from the Ethiopian government that camps will not be targeted.
- Focus its efforts on helping Eritrean refugees find other durable solutions to their displacement, including working with other countries to quickly pursue resettlement options for those in Ethiopia who are most vulnerable.
- Work with Ethiopia and all relevant stakeholders to provide for Eritreans who wish to stay in Ethiopia safe passage out of conflict zones to other parts of the country, including Addis Ababa.

## **The United States government should:**

- Work with the UN and other states to demand a halt to violence and the humanitarian blockade, supporting national dialogue and the provision of aid to all regions, including Tigray, Amhara, and Afar.
- Support accountability for grave human rights abuses by Ethiopia, Eritrea, and armed groups in Tigray and other regions, including through a Human Rights Council's investigations of kidnappings of refugees by Eritrean troops and armed groups and through a public U.S. atrocity determination.
- Include Eritrean refugees among its priority groups for urgent processing and resettlement, and resettle a significant and substantial number of Eritrean refugees.

## **Neighboring states such as Sudan and Kenya should:**

- Prepare to welcome Eritrean refugees who are trying to leave Ethiopia and are unable to find refuge elsewhere, abiding by domestic and international obligations to provide protection to refugees.
- Establish coordination bodies between civil society, the UN, NGOs, and local and national government officials in Sudan to work to prevent human trafficking of refugees (Eritreans and others) and other vulnerable groups in eastern Sudan.

While the world hopes for peace, the conflict in Ethiopia rages on, threatening to tear the country apart. Widespread displacement, ongoing human rights violations, and a humanitarian blockade has resulted in one of the today's worst humanitarian crises. Within this crisis, Eritrean refugees have been left with nowhere to run inside Ethiopia. They have been targeted and starved alongside their hosts and remain vulnerable to additional attacks from all of those party to the conflict. Put simply, Eritrean refugees are no longer safe in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government must immediately work with the UN, donors, NGOs, and Eritrean refugees themselves to ensure that these refugees can find greater safety within Ethiopia, more secure refuge in neighboring countries, and the durable solution of resettlement.

## **About the Author**

Dr. Sarah Miller is a senior fellow at Refugees International and an expert on the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa, as well as the global governance of the refugee regime.

## **About Refugees International**

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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