

Looming closure of 11.000-person refugee camp in the Tigray region of Ethiopia amid COVID-19 threat

A camp of 11.000 refugees in Ethiopia will be closed without any alternatives available to the inhabitants. The camp, the Hitsats camp in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, houses Eritrean refugees amongst whom a large group of vulnerable minors.

The closure is in contravention to international law. The closure:

- Leaves the refugees acutely vulnerable to catching and spreading COVID-19, while lacking access to healthcare, hygiene, food, water and shelter;
- Endangers further spreading of COVID-19 within the population of Ethiopia and other countries in the Horn of Africa, which lack the health infrastructure to manage a widespread outbreak;
- Risks the safety and security of the refugees by exposing them to surveillance and threats by agents of the Eritrean government.

Furthermore,

- The refugee status registration for Eritrean refugees has been stopped by Ethiopia. This denies the refugees access to their right to claim asylum and forces the refugees to settle in illegal and cramped conditions in host communities, exacerbating the problems.
- The refugee population in Hitsats experiences high levels of trauma, which increases vulnerability to physical disease and mental health issues.

Ethiopian authorities and the international community should ensure:

- That the Hitsats refugee camp remains open and running;
- Immediately resumption of the registration of Eritrean refugees and allow them access to asylum procedures as required under international law;
- Adequate healthcare, measures and protection for refugees and host communities to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ensure treatment and care for those affected.

Background:

A source familiar with the situation states that the Ethiopian government plans to move the refugees to another camp structure, but concerns are that this camp is already seriously overcrowded and has no infrastructure and will endanger the exposure of refugees to COVID-19 due to overpopulation

The closure of the camp is delayed as refugees refuse to leave the Hitsats camp, stating that they would rather die than leave the camp. The refugees have petitioned the Federal Government to keep the camp open.

The most immediate concern is vulnerability of refugees to be exposed to the novel coronavirus in overcrowded facilities. The closure of Hitsats will enhance this vulnerability greatly, in addition to exposing the host community. Furthermore, the closing of Hitsats may lead to an increase in secondary migration, which will endanger the government's actions to containing the spread of COVID-19 due to this unnecessary mobility.

Roughly half of the refugees in Hitsats are minors, many of them unaccompanied and traumatised.

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