

The Honorable Dr. Abiy Ahmed
Prime Minister of Ethiopia
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26 May 2020

Subject: Urgent Action required to reverse the decision to shut-down Hinstats refugee camp amidst COVID-19

On behalf of the undersigned Eritrean opposition groups, we are writing this open letter to you to express our grave concerns about the fate of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia. For the last two decades, Eritreans have been faced with the impossible choice of remaining under a brutal dictatorship at home or of terrifying and dangerous journey risking their lives in search of protection, freedom, security and protection in and out of the sub-region. During these difficult times, Ethiopia has generously offered shelter and protection to more than 173,000 Eritreans awaiting return upon change or resettlement to third countries. Ethiopia's generous reception and protection of Eritrean refugees during these turbulent times will be remembered for generations to come.

Under your leadership, the genuine initiative taken to forge lasting peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea had also given Eritreans reasons to be hopeful. However, the policies and political system that drove Eritreans out of their homes remained unchanged. Thus, Eritreans are still crossing borders to seek protection, and those who are already in refugee camps are in a dire need of assistance and assurance of continued protection. Unfortunately, it is under these circumstances that your administration has decided to:

- a) Cease to register incoming asylum seekers and refused to grant them refugee status determination rights specified under the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention;
- b) Shutdown Hitsts refugee camp which was opened in 2013 mainly to relieve pressure on the other camps;
- c) Relocate 26,000 refugees, including 1,600 minors to Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps that are already overcrowded;
- d) The aforementioned actions are carried out amidst COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, we are hereby to express our genuine concern about this historic mistake that will expose vulnerable Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers to grave danger and insecurity. Hence, we strongly urge your Government to take the following steps:

1. Re-establish the reception and registration of incoming Eritrean asylum seekers who have valid grounds for claiming a well-founded fear of persecution.
2. Reconsider plans for the relocations of Hitsats refugees to overcrowd refugee camps amidst COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Continue the generous protection services and granting of refugee status on a *prima facie* basis provided by your predecessors until removal of the circumstance that triggered flights.

We, the undersigned political organizations, believe these measures will relieve the suffering in the immediate term.

1. Eritrean National Council for Democratic Change (ENCDC)
2. Eritrean National Front (ENF)
3. Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP)
4. Organization of Unity for Democratic Change (UDC)
5. United Eritreans for Justice (UEJ)

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Official Representatives

Cc:

- Director General ARRA
- Ethiopian Minister of Health
- The WHO representative- Ethiopia
- African Union
- IGAD
- Resident Representative UNHCR – Ethiopia
- Delegation European Union to Ethiopia