# ETHIOPIA SITUATION (TIGRAY REGION)

12-18 November 2020

*Ethiopian refugees, fleeing clashes in the country's northern Tigray region, cross the border into Hamdayet, Sudan, over the Tekeze river.*

## Key Developments

- A full-scale humanitarian crisis is unfolding as thousands of refugees fleeing ongoing fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray region continue to seek safety in eastern Sudan. On 13 November, UNHCR declared a Level 2 Emergency for both Ethiopia and Sudan.

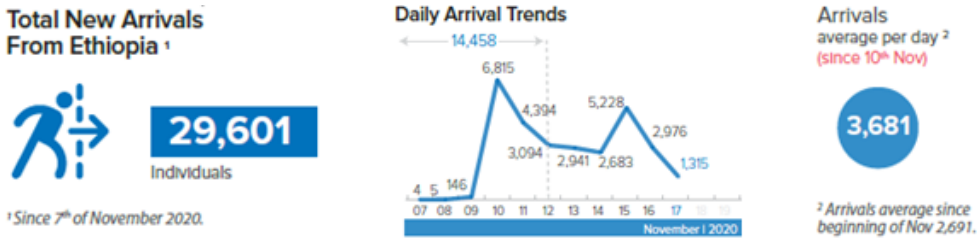
- With an average influx of 4,000 people per day over the last week, the number of new arrivals continues to rise sharply in Sudan with nearly 30,000 reported by 17 November, outpacing the capacity on the ground.

- Within Tigray, for more than two weeks, roads have been blocked and electricity, phone and internet are down throughout the region, making communication nearly impossible. There is a shortage of fuel and banking services have halted resulting in a lack of access to cash.

- UNHCR is very concerned about the safety and possible further displacement of the nearly 100,000 Eritrean refugees living in four camps in Tigray given the proximity of the conflict. The ability to provide services is already severely constrained by access and security concerns as well as fuel shortages.

- Given the deteriorating security situation, UNHCR alongside humanitarian partners in Tigray are taking the difficult decision to relocate non-critical staff out of the Tigray region.

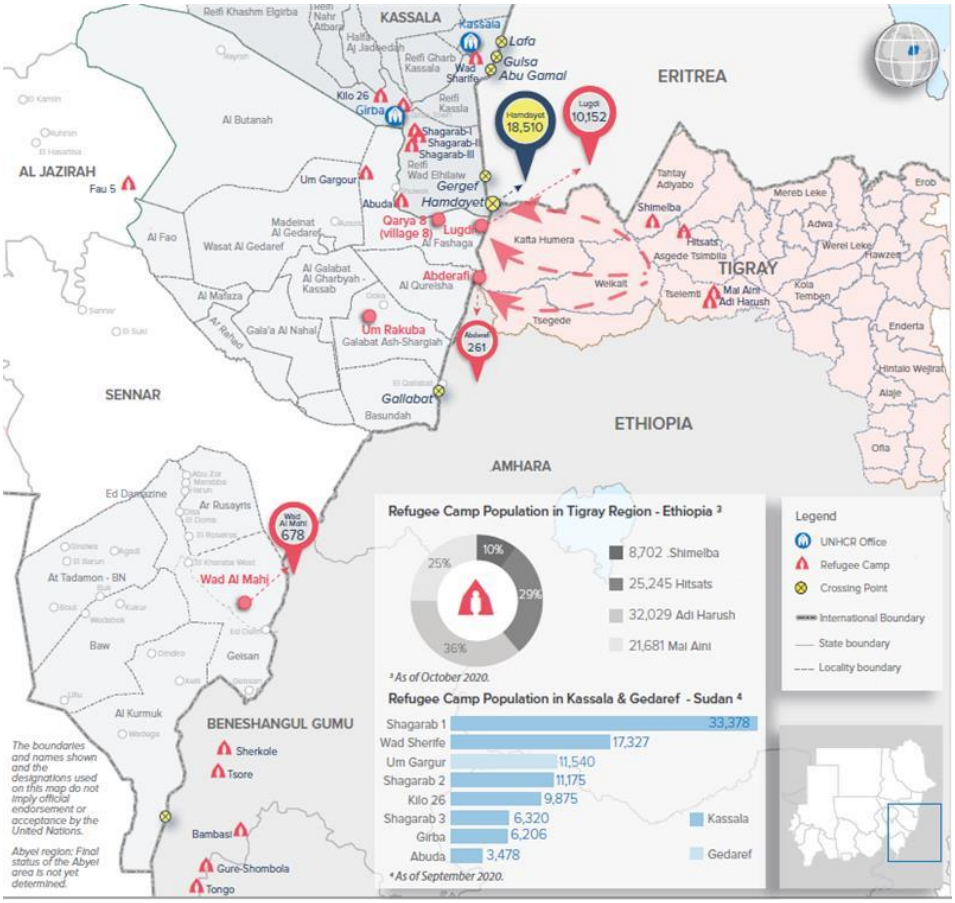
## Overview




A full-scale humanitarian crisis is unfolding as tens of thousands of people have fled the ongoing fighting from the Tigray region each day to seek safety within the country and into neighboring Sudan. Nearly 30,000 Ethiopian asylum seekers have sought refuge in neighboring eastern Sudan with an average of 4,000 people crossing daily. As the situation continues to deteriorate, UNHCR has declared Ethiopia and Sudan as a Level 2 emergency.

The security situation in the Tigray region is severely hampering the delivery of lifesaving services to some 96,000 Eritrean refugees and 100,000 IDPs displaced prior to the crisis. There are reports of thousands of newly displaced people, but exact numbers and their conditions are unknown due to the communications blackout. Over the past week non-essential UN and NGO staff were relocated to Addis Ababa. Journeys took several days as they had to travel by road and pass through numerous check points. The remaining critical staff in Shire are working under extremely difficult circumstances as fighting moves through the area, general movement restriction still in place, the electricity and information black-out continues, and the lack of fuel and scarcity of food worsens. Access remains a major issue. The UN has requested the federal and relevant regional authorities to allow a humanitarian corridor into the Tigray region without success. Earlier in the week, UNHCR was authorized to travel to refugee camps in the Tigray region, however there has been no access to Shimelba camp for the last week due to the proximity of the fighting. Some refugees had packed up their belongings and traveled to Hitsats camp 50 kms on foot.

As of 17 November, 29,601 Ethiopian asylum seekers had crossed into East Sudan from mostly the Tigray region in Ethiopia. The majority have crossed at Hamdayet border point (18,510) in Kassala state, and Lugdi border point and Abderaf border point (10,413) in Gedaref State. New arrivals for the first time on 17 November crossed from Ethiopia's Amhara region border further south into the Blue Nile State (678). Registration at household level is being done by the Commissioner of Refugees (COR) and initial figures show 57 percent male, 43 percent female with 45 percent children (aged under 18). Some Eritreans have also arrived from the Tigray region and are being relocated to the existing Shagarab Camp which is already hosting Eritreans.



# UNHCR Response

## Ethiopia

Protection concerns for hundreds of thousands of people in need in the Tigray region are increasing as the conflict escalates.

As fighting moved to Shire town, there were reports of thousands of newly displaced and concerns for the safety of refugee camps in the area. UNHCR is leading a daily inter-agency coordination cell in Shire to discuss and respond to the evolving situation, including both Eritrean refugees and the emerging IDP situation.

UNHCR is providing daily counseling to refugees and asylum seekers stranded in Shire since the outbreak of the conflict. UNHCR continues to advise on transportation options for relocation to the camps and is working in coordination with IOM to organize movements. To date, 90 refugees were transferred from urban settings to refugee camps where they felt they would be more secure.

In the four refugee camps in Tigray region, refugee incentive workers provide a significant amount of support and outreach to people with specific needs, unaccompanied and separated children and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Intermittent banking services over the last week has led to an inability to provide incentives to them, raising concerns that the community structure in place could collapse and leave the already vulnerable population without support during this critical time.

The last food distribution, for two months, was distributed in late October 2020 to the four refugee camps.

## Sudan

**Arrivals:** The government has generously allowed the border to remain open for refugees. UNHCR and partner staff have access to the border. More than 4,000 people are arriving on a daily basis, tired, scared and with little belongings. The influx, along with fuel shortages, limited vehicles and poor road conditions are hampering the relocation of refugees from the border areas to settlement sites, as well as the delivery of supplies.

The main two transit centres in Hamdayet in Kassala State and Ludgi in Gedaref State are overcrowded. UNHCR, with its partners, continue to support the government in its response as the needs continue to grow. The initial planning figure of 20,000 people was surpassed in only one week, a higher influx of up to 200,000 people in the next six months is now being considered.

UNHCR and COR are registering refugees at household level at all border sites. UNHCR has set up protection desks in all locations to identify persons with special needs and provide protection services.

UNHCR and COR continue to relocate refugees from the Hamdayet transit centre to the new settlement site Um Raquba in Kassala State. An additional site at Tenetba near Fau 5 has been identified, but it will

*Health officials conduct nutrition screenings to newly arriving Ethiopian refugees at Hamdayet transite site.*

need to be established and infrastructure constructed. An inter-agency team will undertake a multi-sectoral assessment and planning mission this week. The site is a two-day road journey from the border, also requiring the construction of a Way Station for overnighting.

**Lugdi in Gedaref State:** Refugees arriving at Lugdi are transported by the Sudanese government to a site called Village 8. There are 1,200 housing units available (pre-existing government housing). The population has passed 10,000 people as of 18 November. Core relief items were provided (blankets, mats, soap) to new arrivals. WFP distributed High Energy Biscuits at Lugdi and dry rations for a month at Village 8. UNHCR is delivering water from the nearby water system directly to Village 8 to avoid refugees from having to carry the water. A health clinic is functional in the area and a team of health staff among the refugee population, supported by the Ministry of Health, are providing medical check-ups to the sick until health staff are on the ground. A second health clinic is functional. Due to logistical challenges, and the prioritization of decongesting Lugdi, refugees are not yet being transferred from Village 8 to a refugee settlement site.

**Hamdayet in Kassala State**: There are currently more than 17,000 refugees located at Hamdayet, a small transit centre with a capacity of 300 people. With numbers arriving at levels never seen at this border in decades, the needs are now enormous. Initially, it was planned that assistance would be provided upon transfer to Um Raquba site, but as numbers increased it has not been possible to move people quickly enough. A communal shelter (rub hall) has been erected, but with limited capacity. COR is now distributing core relief items including blankets, mats, jerry cans and other items. WFP has delivered seven tons of food and 50 cooking pots along with other kitchen utensils. Muslim Aid is providing hot meals but with the number of new arrivals each day, not all are receiving assistance. UNHCR and UNICEF have been providing drinking water through water trucking. Water tanks have been provided by UNICEF and WFP. To address sanitation, UNICEF has provided 50 latrine slabs and WHH/COOPI are currently building 30 communal latrines.

The Sudanese Red Crescent has deployed medical staff and essential medicines to Hamdayet transit site and is providing health services, including medical consultations and referrals, nutritional screening and polio and measles vaccines for new arrivals. Two health clinics are available for medical referrals. The new arrivals will be included in a measles and polio vaccination campaign taking place in the region this week. UNHCR in coordination with UNICEF are working to ensure enough vaccines are in stock. A health taskforce will travel to Gedaref State for health assessment and advocacy to ensure assistance is provided to new arrivals for TB, HIV and Malaria treatment.

To mitigate the risk of COVID-19, social distancing has been introduced in registration areas, ensuring a two-meter space between refugees. At Hamdayet and Village 8 transit centres, UNHCR has distributed soap and masks to new arrivals. Handwashing taps have been set up.

On 18 November, the RC/HC, UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, and UNFPA Representatives met with the Governor a.i. of Kassala thanking the local authorities and its people for receiving Ethiopian refugees. Discussions were held on ongoing support needed from the UN and partners to reach a successful and effective response. The Governor informed the UN delegation that land for additional settlement sites is being identified. The airlift of humanitarian aid will be coordinated with the government. The mission also visited the Hamdayet border crossing, Hamdayet transit site, and Um Raquba settlement site.

**Um Raquba settlement site**: This site has been identified as a settlement to transfer refugees away from the border areas. Initially thought to have a larger capacity, after assessments, it can now hold 6,500 people and discussions with the Government are being held for the expansion of the camp to hold a capacity of 10,000 people. More than 4,000 refugees had been relocated from Hamdayet and 209 from Abderafi. They were provided sleeping mats, blankets and jerry cans among other core relief items. Dry food rations are being distributed and Muslim Aid is providing hot cooked meals. Refugees with medical conditions have access to the nearest state-run health facilities. UNHCR is supporting the establishment of a health facility on site including staff, vehicles and medical supplies. Mercy Corp has deployed health staff and MSF has delivered medicine. Existing infrastructure at the site requires significant renovation and additional construction will also be needed. UNICEF has provided two water tanks. Two boreholes have been identified; it is still to be determined if the capacity is sufficient to meet the needs. The Sudanese Red Crescent Society has started constructing latrines.

**Blue Nile State:** The 678 refugees reported to have arrived in Blue Nile State are currently being hosted in three villages in Wad-Almahi locality.

**Communications and Logistical challenges:** The area along the border where the refugees are arriving is very remote. Most of Eastern Sudan is out of internet and cellular coverage, impeding information sharing and effective communication.

Both transit centres (Hamdayet and Lugdi) and the reopened refugee settlement site, Um Raquba, are in remote locations, some off road. The journey from Kassala to Hamdayet border area takes a minimum of six hours and it is almost eight hours to reach Lugdi. It takes an entire day to relocate new arrivals from Hamdayet to Um Raquba settlement site. It is anticipated to take two days travel time from Hamdayet to a new settlement site identified by the government at Tenetba located near Fau 5. To reach Village 8, the transit centre near Lugdi, border staff either have to take a ferry with a maximum capacity of four vehicles every 1h30 or take a three-hour detour by road.

**Logistics/Stocks:** WFP is supporting with 1,060 metric tons of mixed commodity food items which have been delivered to their Kassala warehouses – enough to support 60,000 people for one month. Food is currently being dispatched from there to the various locations in Gedaref State. 90 metric tons of High Energy Biscuits are being dispatched from Khartoum to Kassala, which will support 200,000 people for three feeding days during the time at border points. Stocks are being mobilized from around the country to Kassala and Gedaref to ensure support for 100,000 people for three months.

UNHCR has core relief items for 40,000 people in Khartoum that are being delivered to Kassala and Gedaref. An additional storage warehouse has been identified in Gedaref.

**Coordination:** The Refugee Working Group in Kassala is the main coordination hub for the Ethiopia situation and it is jointly led by COR and UNHCR. A Refugee Working Group (sub-group) was established in Gedaref. Sector working groups have been established in Kassala on WASH, protection, health, food assistance, food security and livelihoods and shelter and NFI. Sectoral coordination meetings are taking place regularly and partners are finalizing an inter-agency response plan.

## Djibouti

In Djibouti, the government has agreed to allow refugees who may arrive from Ethiopia to enter the country. The government has further agreed in principle that Ethiopian's arriving from the Tigray region will be granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis while others will have their refugee claims assessed individually. No arrivals had been recorded as of 17 November. Furthermore, there are discussions to consider cases of Ethiopians who were already in Djibouti for various reasons but can no longer return home as refugees *sur place*. Contingency planning and preparedness activities are underway with a multi-agency mission to the border this week.

## Eritrea

There are reports of refugees arriving which UNHCR is unable to confirm as access to the border areas is restricted. Under the leadership of the UN Resident Coordinator, access is being requested and contingency and response planning is underway.

### Contacts

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