Tigray Situation Update #3

27 November 2020

Background

The armed conflict which began late 3 November 2020 in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, and the subsequent military offensive ordered by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF) against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), continues unabated. On 7 November, the Ethiopian Parliament voted to dissolve the Government of the Tigray Region. Over the past three weeks, the conflict has also been reported across the region, more recently in the Eastern part of the region and the regional capital, Mekelle, as well as affecting the town of Shire and its environs in Northern Tigray.

On 21 November, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, in his capacity of African Union Chairperson, appointed three Special Envoys to Ethiopia to help mediate between the parties to conflict. Ethiopia, however, rejected the offer, considering it an internal law enforcement mission.

On 23 November, the United Nations' humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia, Catherine Sozi, urged safety guarantees for aid workers, Mekelle's more than half a million inhabitants, and their health, school and water systems. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet urged the parties to the conflict in Tigray to give clear and unambiguous orders to their forces to take constant care to spare and protect the civilian population from the effect of the hostilities. The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres also released a statement, which urged the leaders of Ethiopia to do everything possible to protect civilians, uphold human rights and ensure humanitarian access for the provision of much-needed assistance.

On 22 November, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed urged the Tigray forces to surrender within 72 hours, as EDF forces advanced towards Mekelle. A few hours after the ultimatum expired, on 26 November, The Prime Minister announced the Ethiopian military would begin the "final phase" of an offensive into the Tigray Region.

It is feared the number of those internally displaced inside Tigray as well as to other regions of Ethiopia from the fighting is growing daily, with limited comprehensive information on numbers or casualties. At the same time, over 42,000 Ethiopians have sought safety in Eastern Sudan from Ethiopia, with more than 5,000 women, children and men fleeing the ongoing fighting in the Tigray Region the previous weekend alone.

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Ethiopia is home to 178,315 Eritrean refugees across the country, equal to 22% of the total refugee population in Ethiopia of 796,437. As of 29 October, UNHCR had registered 96,223 Eritrean refugees in the Tigray Region, sheltered mainly in four refugee camps in the western part of the region. Shimelba (population 8,702), Mai-Aini (21,682), Adi-Harush (32,167) and Hitsats (25,248) camps were established between 2004 and 2013. There are also 8,424 refugees residing in the Tigray Region benefitting from the Government's Out of Camp Policy allowing refugees to live in communities. The remaining Eritrean refugees outside Tigray live predominately in the Afar Region (approximately 54,000) and in the capital Addis Ababa (approximately 28,000). Tigray also hosted 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) before the onset of the crisis.

With a Sub-Office in Shire, UNHCR has Field Offices in Embamadre (in proximity to Mai-Aini and Adi-Harush camps) and Mekelle, and satellite offices in Shimelba and Hitsats camps. There is also a UNHCR Registration centre at Endabaguna between Shire and Embamadre.

Current Situation

At time of writing, critical staff remain in Shire and Mekelle. They have, however, no access to the refugee camps due to the security situation. Following the relocation of UNHCR, Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and partner staff, Shimelba camp remains inaccessible. Moreover, due conflict in Shire and its surroundings, UNHCR has also been unable to reach the Mai-Ani, Adi Harush and Hitsats refugee camps for over a week.

UNHCR continues leading a daily inter-agency coordination cell in Shire to discuss the evolving situation, which involves refugee issues as well as the IDP situation. A small number of partners has kept a very limited presence in the three camps. However, there are no vehicle movements between any of the camps nor between the camps and Shire.

Reliable information about the conditions of refugees in the camps are thus extremely limited and difficult to verify. UNHCR estimations on when fuel and other stocks will be depleted, and on the consequent ability of UNHCR and partners to deliver basic services to the refugees, have already passed. Due to lack of communication, there is no confirmation on whether basic services are still functioning in the camps, and which ones.

There are unconfirmed reports of ongoing conflict around Adi Harush camp, as well as confrontations in Hitsats camp. UNHCR is working with its partners to try to ascertain the situation, while continuing to advocate that no civilians should become a target and all possible measures must be taken by all parties to ensure that civilians, be they refugees or host communities, are kept out of harm's way.

UNHCR and partners have identified an estimated 3,000 IDPs primarily from Humera and Shiraro taking shelter in three schools in Shire town, with hundreds more in other parts of the town. They lack food, water, blankets, mattress and access to health services. UNHCR partners that are part of the Inter-Agency coordination in Shireare working to distribute core relief items (CRIs), water, biscuits and other assistance.

Issues and Challenges

- UNHCR and partners were forced to relocate most of their staff from Shire in northern Tigray Region. Only a limited number of critical national staff remain, in the areas affected by the clashes.

- A crucial concern is access to food for the overall refugee population in Tigray. The last joint WFP, ARRA and UNHCR general food distribution supplied food for two months (October and November). At most three days of food supplies are estimated to left in the camps. UNHCR is advocating for access to the Tigray Region and the refugee camps to deliver these rations.

- Immediate unhindered humanitarian access is needed to bring in lifesaving support, including fuel supplies to run vehicles and generators, as well as cash to support vulnerable Persons of Concern.

- Communication remains an overriding challenge as telephone networks and internet have been cut since the start of the conflict. Within this communications blackout, several erroneous information pieces have been circulated on social media, including related to UNHCR, and UNHCR urges those using social media to share information responsibly and from corroborated and trusted sources only.

- Refugee incentive workers provide a significant amount of support and outreach to People with Specific Needs and Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) and Sexual and Gender Based Violence survivors within the camps. Lack of access to cash has led to an inability to provide incentives, leading to concerns that community structures may collapse, leaving vulnerable populations without support during a critical time period.

Ethiopia operation: presence in Tigray as of November 2020

CONTACTS

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