

Tigray Situation Update #1

10 November 2020

Background

Tigray region in the north of Ethiopia, bordering Eritrea and Sudan, is home to approximately 6.5 million people, and covers 85,000 Km², equivalent to Austria or the U.A.E in size. Tension between the Federal Government and Tigray's ruling party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has been escalating since the latter unilaterally held regional elections on 9 September 2020, while the national elections were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Armed conflict was reported late evening 3 November 2020, and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that the Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF) were given orders to start a military offensive against the TPLF in Tigray.

The same day, the Tigray regional government, in a statement broadcast on television, announced that it had banned flights inside its airspace. Effective 6 November 2020, the Federal Government declared a six-month State of Emergency (SoE) for the Tigray region. Flights as well as travel on roads inside Tigray and in and out of the region are prohibited, and communication lines are shut down in the region. Meanwhile, Ethiopia's parliament, in an emergency meeting on 7 November, voted to dissolve the Government of the Tigray region, noting that a new caretaker administration would hold elections and "implement decisions passed on by the Federal Government".

The Ethiopia Human Rights Commission and some opposition parties have called for ensuring the protection of civilians. The AU, EU and UN and others have issued statements calling for de-escalation of tensions and the peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue.

Ethiopia is home to 178,315 Eritrean refugees across the country, equal to 22% of the total refugee population in Ethiopia of 796,437. 96,223 Eritrean refugees reside in Tigray, sheltered mainly in four refugee camps in the western part of the Tigray 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 rather than only in camps. The remaining Eritrean refugees outside Tigray, 82,092, live predominately in the next-door regions of Afar (approximately 54,000) and in the capital Addis Ababa (approximately 28,000). Tigray also counted 100,000 Internally displaced within the population before the onset of the crisis.

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

As of 10 November, all UNHCR and partners' staff in the region are well and accounted for. Currently, there are 83 UNHCR staff in Tigray, including staff who were on mission in Shire at the time of movement restrictions.

Current Response

UNHCR, in partnership with the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), UN agencies and NGO partners has been extending protection and humanitarian assistance to over 96,000 Eritrean refugees who are mostly sheltered in refugee camps, and in the host communities in Tigray. The refugees are not in immediate danger

from the current fighting. However, in the swiftly changing current situation, if the fighting spreads closer and into areas most refugees are currently housed, this may cause secondary displacement, alongside major disruptions to vital services.

The refugees have access to basic services in the camps, including food, water and sanitation, shelter, healthcare and education, which remain operational. However, in two of the four refugee camps (Adi-Harush and Mai-Aini) UNHCR staff have been unable to access the camps and monitor the situation due to movement restrictions and disruptions in communication lines. The local authorities gave UNHCR permission, as of 9 November, to facilitate staff movement to and from all the camps, which will allow for monitoring of the situation and services.

Refugees are receiving clean water in all camps. However, there is concern that this may be disrupted if power supply goes off completely and shortages of fuel is not addressed as most of the boreholes are connected to the national power grid, with the exception of Shimelba where solar power is used.

Health and nutrition services are operational as the staff of ARRA now have full access to the camps. Services include regular consultations, emergency Out Patient Department (OPD), maternal care and nutrition services.

The operation has pre-positioned stocks of soap and dignity to cater for the existing refugee population. WFP has distributed food for two months but needs to preposition food stocks from its warehouse in Adama, Oromia Region if movement restrictions are lifted.

After a long break due to COVID-19, schools reopened in October, starting with grades 8 and 12 as they need to sit for the national examinations soon. The reopening of classes for grades 9 to 11 was scheduled for 9 November but was postponed by the Woreda Education Bureau.

Issues and Challenges

- Telephone and internet services remain down, making communication very difficult. There is a shortage of fuel, and banking services have halted resulting in a lack of cash.
- There is dwindling supply of food in the markets for the over 8,400 refugees living outside camps, as well as the local population and aid workers. Refugees in the four camps had already received food for two months in November.
- Amidst general movement restrictions, UNHCR currently has permission from zonal authorities to move to reach refugee camps. However, this in a more limited manner than normal, and with additional constraints due to the continuing blackout of communications in the region, within the context of the fluid security situation.
- Without access to fuel, which is already being rationed in the region, UNHCR and partners will struggle to continue running their operations in the next two weeks.
- UNHCR is part of the overall UN security management system. Daily discussions are reviewing the unfolding situation and subsequent action that may need to be taken to relocate non-essential staff if the situation deteriorates further. Concurrent to this, UNHCR is part of the overall contingency planning exercise taking place for the Tigray region facilitated by OCHA. At the same time a refugee specific contingency plan is being prepared, both for inside Ethiopia and in collaboration with UNHCR offices in surrounding countries.



Map of refugee locations and UNHCR presence in Tigray

Contacts

CONTACTS

Juliette Stevenson, Senior External Relations Officer,
stevenson@unhcr.org Tel: +251-116 17 05 90, Cell + 251-944-109031

Kisut Gebreegziabher, National Communications Officer,
Gegziabk@UNHCR.org Tel: +251-116 17 05 90, Cell +251-911208901