ETHIOPIA SITUATION (TIGRAY REGION)

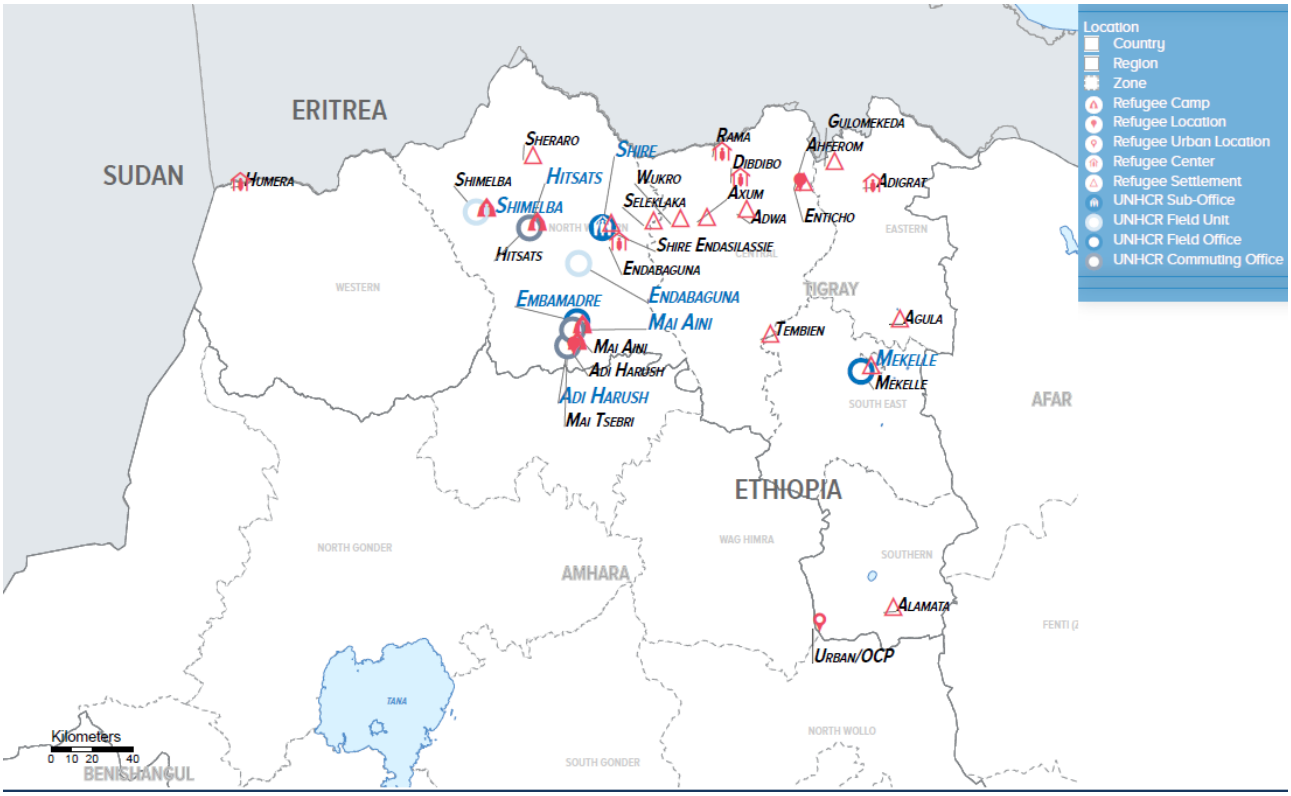
11 November 2020

Overview

UNHCR is concerned about the humanitarian situation in the Tigray Region with the recent outbreak of conflict and the declaration of a six-month state of emergency by the Federal Government, affecting the protection and humanitarian response for Eritrean refugees in the region and heightening the likelihood of further internal and external displacement of Ethiopians. The first arrivals of Ethiopian asylum seekers were recorded in Sudan on 9 November, with some 7,000 people crossing the border in a 24-hour period.

The situation in the Eritrean refugee camps has remained calm, with no reports of refugees seeking to leave in any significant numbers. However, humanitarian activities have been limited by the current situation. Roads are 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, limiting the case in circulation. As the conflict escalates, there is concern for the physical security of refugees, internally displaced persons and UNHCR and partner staff, and the ability to continue to carry out lifesaving services.

Ethiopia is home to 178,000 Eritrean refugees, including 96,000 mainly accommodated in four refugee camps in the western part of the Tigray Region with 8,400 refugees living out of camps in host communities. Shimelba (population 8,700), Mai-Aini (21,600), Adi-Harush (32,000) and Hitsats (25,000) camps were established between 2004 and 2013. Tigray also counted 100,000 internally displaced within the region before the onset of the crisis. With a Sub-Office in Shire, UNHCR has Field Offices in Embamadre and Mekelle, and satellite offices in Shimelba and Hitsats camps. There is also a UNHCR Registration centre at Endabaguna, near Shire where small numbers of new Eritrean asylum seekers have continued to arrive from border areas.



UNHCR 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 the four refugee camps, and in the host communities in Tigray. To date, fighting has not been in close proximity to the refugee camps although there were reports on 11 November that the conflict moved closer to Shimelba camp. In the swiftly changing situation, if the fighting spreads to areas where refugees are currently located, this may cause secondary displacement, alongside major disruptions to vital services. Meanwhile internally displaced Ethiopians have begun to arrive to Shire town.

Access

Amidst general movement restrictions, UNHCR currently is authorized to travel to the refugee camps, although is exercising caution due to the continuing blackout of communications in the region and the fluid security situation. UNHCR continues to advocate for unfettered access to sites, and for the cessation of hostilities.

Following the declaration of the six-month state of emergency in the Tigray Region, the regional government has also declared a no-fly zone. While it is unclear how long the no-fly zone may be in effect, this will limit movement of staff as well as relief items and commodities, including food into the region. It will also limit the capacity to respond to the humanitarian needs if conditions deteriorate.

With reports of a strong military presence at the border, admission into the territory may not be feasible for asylum seekers from Eritrea. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation.

Cross-border movements

Scenario planning and preparation for potential refugee movements has been ongoing with Governments and partners in neighboring countries. A regional contingency plan is being updated and UNHCR country operations are stepping up emergency relief preparedness to be able to respond to additional displacements as the situation evolves.

Sudan: The border is open to civilians. UNHCR and the Commissioner for Refugees (COR) have reported the arrival of some 7,000 Ethiopian asylum seekers at two border entry points in Sudan's Gedaref and Kassala States. UNHCR and local authorities are jointly screening and registering people. UNHCR and COR are currently identifying a new refugee site in Gedaref where UNHCR will be re-opening an office. Interviews with newly arriving refugees are underway to shed more light on what movements may be occurring inside Ethiopia to assess possible numbers. Reports suggest that the numbers of new arrivals will continue to rise sharply, which will require a significant mobilisation of resource to address the growing needs.

New arrivals from Ethiopia at the border point in Hamdayet in Kassala State, Sudan. Photo credit: WFP

Djibouti: The land borders of the country are currently closed, a measure taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. UNHCR is in discussion with the government to allow refugees in the event of an influx from Ethiopia. A significant Tigrayan population resides in the Afar Region of Ethiopia bordering Djibouti. A joint mission was deployed in the regions of Tadjourah, Dikhil and Ali Sabieh to assess reception capacity at the borders, reassess planning scenarios and prepare for the potential arrival of Ethiopian asylum seekers from Tigray. Asylum seekers would be transferred from the transit centres to the existing refugee villages of Ali Addeh, Holl Holl and Ara Oussa.

Eritrea: The situation at the border is difficult to ascertain. In addition to the continued arrival of Eritrean asylum seekers it is possible that some Ethiopians may move toward Eritrea to avoid the ongoing conflict.

Assistance

In **Ethiopia**, refugees continue to have access to basic services in the camps, including food, water and sanitation, shelter, and education. Core relief items in place are sufficient to cater for the existing refugee population.

In two of the four refugee camps (Adi-Harush and Mai-Aini) UNHCR staff had initially been unable to access the camps and monitor the situation due to movement restrictions put in place with the State of Emergency. 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. However, movements remain limited due to the prevailing security situation. Staff will be visiting field locations on a rotational basis to check on the continuity of basic services but undertaking large scale distributions will be difficult under the current circumstance.

ARRA continues to provide health and nutrition services in the camps. Services include regular consultations, emergency Outpatient Department (OPD), maternal care and nutrition services.

Schools remain open in the camps there, which had only restarted in the last couple of weeks after being closed for months due to COVID-19.

In **Sudan**, UNHCR has a multi-sectoral team of protection staff and technical specialists in water, sanitation and hygiene and health on mission to Gedaref to carry out an assessment to identify available resources and gaps in preparation for additional arrivals. UNHCR is mobilizing resources in country to provide life-saving assistance to the new arrivals.

Interagency coordination

In **Ethiopia**, the Refugee Coordination Model is applied and UNHCR has assumed responsibility for a refugee specific contingency plan. UNHCR is also part of the overall contingency planning exercise taking place for the Tigray region facilitated by OCHA. The UN security management system has responsibility for humanitarian actors and assets. 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.

In **Sudan**, the Refugee Consultation Forum (RCF), co-chaired between UNHCR and the Commission for Refugees (COR), has held meetings with international and local partners and UN Agencies to prepare a contingency plan for the influx of refugees from Ethiopia. Inter-agency contingency response planning is well under way and UNHCR has issued an urgent call for operational partners (UN and NGOs) to pledge existing operational resources in the East which can be used for the emergency response.

In **Djibouti**, a partner coordination platform under the joint leadership of ONARS (Djibouti Government) and UNHCR exists at the central level and at the field office level of Ali Sabbieh and Obock.

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