

# Tigray Situation Update

21 January 2021



*An Eritrean refugee in Mai Aini camp in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia receives the monthly food ration through a joint distribution by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Ethiopia's Agency for Refugees and Returnee Affairs (ARRA).  
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## Background

On 4 November 2020, military confrontations between federal and regional forces in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which borders both Sudan and Eritrea, led the Government to declare a State of Emergency. Since then, and despite the announcement of an official end to military operations at the end of November, Ethiopia's Tigray region has continued to be affected by armed clashes and insecurity, having a serious impact on access and the provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Due to the conflict, UNHCR and partners were forced to relocate most of their staff from the Tigray region. Only a limited number of critical staff remain, in the areas affected by the conflict. With limited access to cash, fuel and food, their operational capacity has been severely hindered. This in turn has led to a drastic halt in the delivery of services to Eritrean refugees.

While the situation in Adi-Harush and Mai Aini refugee camps has been recently accessed, and 25,000 Eritrean refugees sheltered in both camps received a one-month food ration in December, UNHCR and partners have not been able to access Hitsats and Shimelba camps for nearly three months, putting the safety and survival of the refugees at great risk.

The lack of access to food, fuel and other essential supplies has created a complex humanitarian situation with extreme suffering and life-threatening consequences. To find safety and basic means of survival, Eritrean refugees have been fleeing from camps -particularly from Shimelba and Hitsats- to other locations within Tigray and other regions of Ethiopia, as well as to Sudan.

The IDPs in Shire and the adjacent areas have also received very limited assistance as humanitarian actors are not allowed access to many of these areas.

In the meantime, [UNHCR has been advocating](#) with the Ethiopian federal authorities for urgent, full and unimpeded humanitarian access to Eritrean refugees, who are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance and services.

The number of newly internally displaced persons in Tigray, as well as those who have moved to Afar and Amhara regions of Ethiopia, grew steadily since the start of the conflict. OCHA and the Clusters indicate initial estimates for humanitarian planning figures at 413,849 newly internally displaced people, mainly concentrated in Northern Woredas of Western Tigray (386,314), together with 23,681 in Afar and 3,854 in Amhara region. At the same time, to date 59,226 individuals have sought safety in Eastern Sudan from Ethiopia.

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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 end October 2020, 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 (8,702 refugees), Mai-Aini (21,682), Adi-Harush (32,167) and Hitsats (25,248). There were 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).

In Tigray, UNHCR has a Sub-Office in Shire and a Field Office in Mekelle. While not currently operational due to the security situation and lack of humanitarian access, UNHCR also had a field office in Embamadre (in proximity to Mai-Aini and Adi-Harush camps) and satellite offices in Shimelba and Hitsats camps, as well as a Registration Centre at Endabaguna between Shire and Embamadre.

## Response

- The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi recently [issued an statement on the situation of Eritrean refugees](#) in Ethiopia's Tigray region, highlighting the severe human rights violations against Eritrean refugees, including killings, abductions, forced returns to Eritrea, and requesting full and unimpeded humanitarian access to provide assistance.
- Discussions are ongoing with the Federal Government for UNHCR to have unhindered access to the Eritrean refugee camps, and to areas where refugees have fled to, within and outside the Tigray region.

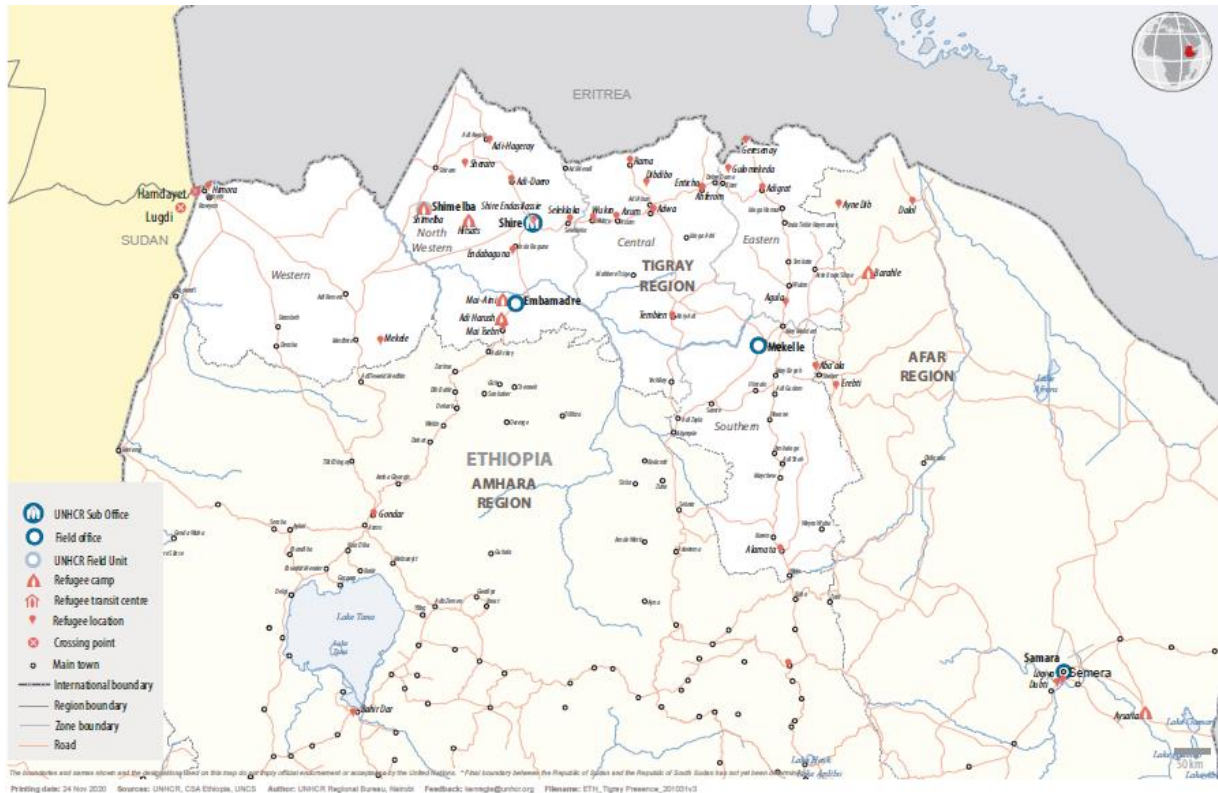
- Eritrean refugees in Adi-Harush and Mai Aini camps received [a month's worth of food supplies](#) through a joint delivery by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Ethiopia's Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) in mid-December. However, UNHCR and humanitarian agencies are still unable to access Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps to deliver urgently needed food.
- A UNHCR-led inter-agency multisectoral assessment mission to two of the four Eritrean refugee camps – Mai Aini and Adi Harush – took place from 4 to 9 January. Refugees at both camps noted that service provision had completely ceased during the conflict and the refugees remain particularly concerned about their safety and security, reporting ongoing looting in the camp at night by armed groups/persons.
- UNHCR's implementing partner, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), has been working to resume the provision of clean water in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, while the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) is re-establishing basic health services.
- UNHCR is working on the urgent mobilization and deployment of staff to Debarq to support the re-establishment of services Mai Aini and Adi Harush refugee camps some 110 km away and build up capacity to contribute to efforts to assist IDPs in both Tigray and Amhara regions.
- UNHCR has mobilized Core Relief Items (CRIs) from the stockpiles in Kampala and Nairobi to support 25,000 Eritrean refugee households Mai-Aini and Adi-Harush camps in Tigray region. The first batch of CRIs to bring assistance to some 5,000 families is planned to arrive to the camps on 27 January.
- In Shire, UNHCR and partners have been able to provide some humanitarian assistance to IDPs in three IDP shelters in town (Axum University's Shire campus, Shire High School and Embadanso Elementary School), including clean water, health referrals and reproductive health interventions, psychological first aid and prevention and response to gender-based violence. Additional mattresses, blankets, soap and high energy biscuits have been provided to vulnerable families. However, the greatest challenge among the IDPs is their increasing level of food insecurity.

## 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 staff remain in the areas affected by the conflict.
- While some telecommunications have resumed in Mekelle, the majority of roads to and within the region remain inaccessible and basic services including healthcare and banking have virtually ceased to operate, with food and electricity in short supply.

- Due to the lack of access to Shimelba and Hitsats refugee camps, reliable information about the conditions of refugees in those camps remains extremely limited and difficult to verify, with unconfirmed but consistent reports of attacks, abductions and forced recruitment at the refugee camps.
- There is an urgent need to bring food rations and other assistance for refugees who fled to Shire and allow for delivery of life saving assistance under secure conditions. It is estimated that there are over 10,000 refugees in and around Shire, including recent arrivals from Hitsats and Shimelba camps, who are struggling to survive, in need of shelter, food and essential services that are not available.
- While all medical services in Shire town ceased operating in mid-November, the Shire Hospital nominally reopened in late December, albeit with very limited capacity which only allows to address emergency cases for limited hours during the daytime. A handful of nurses and administrators had voluntarily returned to work, but there are no doctors or electricity, and limited stocks of medicines.
- 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 in 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: Tigray presence as of January 2021



### CONTACTS

**Juliette Stevenson**, Senior External Relations Officer, [stevenson@unhcr.org](mailto:stevenson@unhcr.org)

### LINKS

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