

Tigray Situation Update

8 February 2021



UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi speaks with Eritrean refugees in Mai Aini camp. © UNHCR/Petterik Wiggers.

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, with 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 remained in the areas affected by the conflict. With limited access to cash, fuel and food, their operational capacity was severely hindered. This led to a drastic halt in the delivery of services to Eritrean refugees.

While Adi-Harush and Mai Aini refugee camps have been recently accessed, and 26,000 Eritrean refugees sheltered in both camps have received their monthly food rations in December and January, UNHCR and partners have not been able to access Hitsats and Shimelba camps since November, and by many accounts conflict in and around the two camps has led to the flight of most if not all the

refugees to other locations within Tigray and other regions of Ethiopia, as well as to Sudan in search of safety and life-saving assistance.

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 521,200 newly internally displaced people, mainly concentrated in Northern Woredas of Western Tigray (493,300), together with 23,680 in Afar and 3,850 in Amhara region. At the same time, to date 60,885 individuals have sought safety in Eastern Sudan from Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is home to [177,996](#) Eritrean refugees across the country, equal to 22% of the total refugee population in Ethiopia of 801,349. Before the conflict erupted in the Tigray region in November 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: Mai-Aini (21,682), Adi-Harush (32,167), Shimelba (8,702 refugees) and Hitsats (25,248). As of 11 February, more than 5,000 refugees from Shimelba and Hitsats camps have relocated in Mai-Aini and Adi Harush.

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 51,800) and in the capital Addis Ababa (approximately 30,722).

In Tigray, UNHCR has a Sub-Office in Shire as well as a Field Office in Mekelle, where the Agency plans to scale up its presence to meet the current protection and humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs. Furthermore, UNHCR has recently set up an operational hub in Debark to support the re-establishment of services in Mai Aini and Adi Harush refugee camps and to build up capacity to contribute to efforts to assist IDPs in Tigray and Amhara regions. While not currently operational due to the security situation and lack of humanitarian access, UNHCR also had a field office in Embamadre (in close proximity to Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps).

Response

- The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi [visited Ethiopia from 29 January to 1 February](#). During his four-day visit the High Commissioner travelled to Mai Aini refugee camp in the Tigray Region to meet with Eritrean refugees. In Addis Ababa, he held meetings with Government officials and other stakeholders.
- Following Government's decision on the closure of Shimelba and Hitsats refugee camps, authorities initiated on 23rd January the process of relocating the refugees who had fled those camps to Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps. Most of these refugees have been suffering from a dire lack of basic needs and high experiences of trauma. Current planning estimates suggest that some 10,000 refugees may relocate during the coming period, either with the support of the Ethiopian Defence force or in a spontaneous manner.
- A Relocation Task Force co-chaired by ARRA and UNHCR in Mai Tsebri has been bringing together partner agencies to address the shelter, WASH and protection needs of the relocated Eritrean refugees in Mai Aini and Adi Harush refugee camps.

- UNHCR organised a first distribution of core relief items in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps from 29 January until 2 February. Some 2,600 refugees have been provided with basic house-hold items such as blankets, kitchen sets, laundry soap, or jerry cans, amongst other items.
- In Shire, despite challenging conditions and limited resources, support to IDPs continues through a variety of means. The National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC) has arrived in Shire and begun to distribute 15kg of food per individual in the IDP communal sites since Saturday 23 January. WASH services continue through IRC, and distribution of sanitary items is underway with donations from UNICEF, and supported by NRC, MSF and IRC.

Issues and Challenges

- The ongoing lack of access to Shire is constraining humanitarian assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons.
- Most partners previously operating from Shire, together with a few organizations which have been able to restructure so far through Amhara, are working to resume services in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps. UNHCR, for its part, is systematically working to increase staffing levels in the camps.
- In Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, UNHCR and ARRA, together with partners, are working to restart life-saving and basic services for the refugees, as well as to address the lack of enough land and resources to accommodate refugees who have relocated from Hitsats and Shimelba camps, as well as from other areas of Tigray.
- Telecommunications have partially resumed in Mekelle, and basic services -including healthcare and banking- are beginning to be restored. However, the majority of roads to and within the Tigray region remain inaccessible. So far, this has posed serious challenges to the delivery of assistance by humanitarian actors.

Ethiopia operation: Tigray presence as of February 2021



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LINKS

[Ethiopia Data Portal](#)

[Ethiopia Situation – Tigray Emergency Situational Page](#)

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