

Dire Dawa, 20 February 2020

## First major group of Ethiopian refugees return home from Kenya

A group of 76 Ethiopian refugees have voluntarily returned home from Kenya's Kakuma camp yesterday. This marks the first major voluntary repatriation program for Ethiopian refugees in the country.

The movement, supported by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the Governments of Ethiopia and Kenya, is part of a growing trend of thousands of Ethiopian refugees in the region who are voluntarily choosing to return back to their country, following recent developments.

"On behalf of the Ethiopian Government and its Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA), I'm so happy to welcome you home today and to see you arrive in your home land safely", said Ato Nuruhussien Hassen, Head of Returnees Section within the Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs, ARRA.

"Working closely with UNHCR and other partners, we will do all we can to help you rebuild your lives in the towns and villages of your origin".

The majority of those returning originate from Ethiopia's Somali region and had been living in exile for up to 12 years. More than half are women and girls, with some having been born and raised in Kakuma.

"Today is a big day for UNHCR. Nothing is more fulfilling than to assist refugees to return home and re-establish themselves afresh in their villages and towns of origin," said Ann Encontre, the UNHCR Representative in Ethiopia.

"All refugees have the fundamental human right to return voluntarily to their country in safety and dignity at a time of their own choosing".

The return was organized by UNHCR with the support of IOM. The returnees were flown from Kakuma to the eastern Ethiopian city of Dire Dawa in two UNHCR-chartered flights and transported by road to Jijiga, capital of the Somali Region.

UNHCR is providing returnees with a reintegration package in the form of cash assistance which also includes transportation allowances to ensure they can travel to their places of origin.

Yesterday's return movement, a significant milestone in the quest to provide solutions to one of Africa's protracted refugee situations, follows a previous repatriation in June 2019 in which 94 Ethiopian refugees were assisted to return home from Sudan

More voluntary return movements from Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps are expected in the coming months.

To date, more than 10,000 Ethiopian refugees, in regional and neighbouring countries, have expressed to UNHCR their intention to return home, including those hosted in Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen.

Returns from Djibouti and Kenya are currently being prioritized, with more than 4,000 Ethiopian refugees expected to voluntarily return home from Kenya this year and 500 from Djibouti.

The surge in numbers follows recent reforms in Ethiopia, which have opened the political space and are widely believed to be improving the country's respect for human rights and the quality of life for its citizens.

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