THE AMERICA TEAM FOR DISPLACED ERITREANS

CORONAVIRUS_UPDATES

April 10, 2020

(Updates to this document will appear at http://eritreanrefugees.org/news/)

The global coronavirus pandemic has affected Eritreans in Eritrea, Eritrean refugees and Eritrean asylum seekers in various ways. In this document, The America Team for Displaced Eritreans has undertaken to report on pertinent developments that have come to our attention.

We do not purport to cover all developments. The dates set forth in the various entries are sometimes approximate, and may be based in part on when The America Team actually received the pertinent news reports.

A. In Eritrea.


March 17 – Although Eritrea was coronavirus-free at this point, the government banned all internal travel.

March 21, 2020 – An Eritrean national residing in Norway flew to Eritrea and was then confirmed to be infected. That was the first known case in Eritrea.

March 23, 2020 – The Eritrean government imposed additional travel, gathering and social distancing guidelines on its population.

March 25 – After three more international air arrivals tested positive for coronavirus, the government banned international flights.

March 27, 2020 – The government imposed a more severe lockdown, shuttering transport facilities and schools.

March 29, 2020 – Six more international air passengers who had arrived in Eritrea prior to the flight ban were diagnosed with coronavirus, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 12.
March 30, 2020 – As the number of infections reached 15, the government ordered the closing of bars, restaurants and other service outlets. It also suspended payment obligations for household electricity, water and telephone bills, and it postponed all court sessions.

April 3, 2020 – The Eritrean government ordered all citizens to remain in their homes for 21 days.

April 5 and 6, 2020 – The Eritrean government announced that Eritreans in Scandinavia, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany, Kuwait, the United Kingdom and the U.S. were sending substantial financial and other contributions to help contain the spread of the coronavirus. For the most part, the reports did not state where or to whom the contributions were being sent, or what they would be used for.

April 6, 2020 – VOA reported that a Chinese air shipment of protective masks and test kits that was destined for Eritrea never arrived, for reasons not yet known. Reportedly the Eritrean government may have forbidden the plane to land.

April 9, 2020 – Some 33 coronavirus infections had been reported by the government, but still no deaths.

B. In Ethiopia.

March 13, 2020 – The Ethiopian government reportedly adopted a plan to close the Hitsats refugee camp in Tigray, which houses many Eritreans. The closure would likely result in the refugees being moved to other, overcrowded camps. Overcrowding threatens the rapid spread of the coronavirus. Alternatively, the refugees might attempt to flee to other countries, where they could spread or be infected by the coronavirus in chaotic circumstances.

March 23, 2020 – The Ethiopian government moved to close nearly all of its land borders so as to stop the spread of the coronavirus, subject to certain exceptions. The result could prevent Eritreans from fleeing to Ethiopia.

March 31, 2020 – An increase in violence against foreigners was reported.

April 3, 2020 – UNHCR issued a release stating that the Ethiopian government had postponed the closing of the Hitsats refugee camp, apparently due to the coronavirus emergency. The statement also indicated that refugees arriving from Eritrea were being kept in quarantine at the border, and not proceeding through the regular registration, screening and distribution process. In addition, the statement said that UNHCR had suspended its own activities at its reception center for urban refugees in Addis Ababa.

C. In Libya.

March 24, 2020 – UNHCR closed two of its facilities in Tripoli due to the spread of the coronavirus. On March 25 it resumed some emergency services.
April 3, 2020 – UNHCR warned that the Libyan civil war had weakened the ability of the country’s health services to respond to the coronavirus, including by way of damage to hospitals. The organization also called upon Libyan authorities to release all detained migrants, in that their crowded conditions, poor sanitation facilities and limited access to health care services was placing them at particular risk for contracting the disease. To that date, ten coronavirus cases and one death had been reported in Libya.

April 4, 2020 – An Al-Jazeera report more fully described the risks to the 700,000 refugees and migrants in Libya, including the thousands detained in dire conditions, and it warned that the coronavirus outbreak could become “truly catastrophic” for them. By then the country had 17 reported cases, a curfew, and a ban on inter-city travel.

D. In Uganda.

March 25, 2020 – The Ugandan government announced that it had closed its borders to all new refugee arrivals, owing to the pandemic.

E. In Israel.

March 22, 2020 – The Israeli government was reported to have determined that Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers would receive the same medical care for the coronavirus as Israeli citizens. The asylum seekers do not have public health insurance, and most had lost their jobs due to the closing of businesses and services in connection with the pandemic.

F. In Europe.

March 31, 2020 – NGOs’ search and rescue missions on the Mediterranean had reportedly stopped.

March 31, 2020 – Anti-foreigner rhetoric in some Europe countries had risen – including in Spain and Italy, which had been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic.

G. In Mexico.

March 31, 2020 – The Mexican government was reportedly taking few steps to slow the spread of the disease, thus jeopardizing migrants seeking and waiting to enter the U.S. at the border.

April 3, 2020 – Would-be asylum seekers wishing to enter the U.S. from Mexico at regular ports of entry were reportedly unable to practice social distancing in crowded migrant shelters or amid the congested conditions on the bridges connecting the two countries. Physicians attending to the migrants expected substantial outbreaks of the coronavirus under those circumstances.
H. By the U.N. and NGOs, generally.

March 17, 2020 – The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suspended all refugee resettlement operations, due to international air travel restrictions and public health restrictions in some destination countries.

April 2, 2020 – The UN’s Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Eritrea called upon the Eritrean government to free all political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, low-risk offenders and others such as the sick and elderly, in an effort to save them from contracting the coronavirus in overcrowded prisons. On April 3, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International issued similar calls.

April 7, 2020 – UNHCR announced that it was increasing its capacity to prevent, treat and limit the spread of the coronavirus within refugee communities in several African regions, including the Horn. The organization pointed to factors that were seen as increasing the risks of infection in those communities: crowded conditions, inadequate water and sanitation facilities, geographical remoteness as between refugee camps and strong medical facilities, and refugees’ already precarious livelihoods and food security that were now made more severe by the pandemic. Among other things, UNHCR urged national health ministries to include the refugees whom their countries hosted in their overall national response plans; and it urged host governments to provide distance learning to students, cash assistance to the most economically vulnerable refugees, and public awareness campaigns for their entire populations. The organization also announced that it had solicited from its donors some $15 million in special coronavirus funding for East Africa and the Horn.

I. In the U.S.

March 13, 2020 – The U.S. government said that its recent rule disqualifying more people from permanent resident status if they use government social welfare benefits would not apply to immigrants seeking medical care for coronavirus symptoms.

March 13, 2020 – The U.S. government restricted travel to the U.S. from most European countries.

March 13, 2020 – Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced that it was suspending social visitation at its detention facilities.

March 18, 2020 – The U.S. paused all refugee admissions.

March 18, 2020 – After having already closed some immigration courts, the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) announced the closing of additional courts and the postponement of all asylum and deportation hearings for immigrants who were not already in detention. The move came in response to calls for such closings by immigration judges, attorneys and government prosecutors, and to the sometimes crowded conditions which immigrants had been experiencing in connection with their hearings.
One consequence of the closures appeared to be that migrants who had been paroled into the general U.S. population pending their asylum or deportation hearings could expect to remain paroled until courts reopened. Another possible consequence was that migrants seeking to enter the U.S. from Mexico would have to wait even longer in Mexico (pursuant to the Migrant Protection Protocols program, known as “Remain in Mexico”) before being scheduled for asylum or withholding-from-removal hearings here.

March 18, 2020 – ICE said that it would halt arrests of undocumented migrants during the pandemic except as needed to maintain public safety and national security. ICE also said that individuals should not avoid seeking medical care because they fear civil immigration enforcement actions (a fear that had been widely reported). The announcement came at a time when an increasing number of employees of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its constituent agencies had come to be infected and/or quarantined. In the days following the announcement, some prominent voices within President Trump’s administration criticized the ICE order to scale down its enforcement actions, thus raising uncertainty as to the order’s efficacy.

March 18, 2020 – ICE suspended some deportation flights.

March 20, 2020 – President Trump and the Centers for Disease Control announced that Customs and Border Patrol would begin summarily expelling undocumented migrants who were apprehended at the Mexican border rather than placing them in U.S. detention and rather than giving them an opportunity to apply for asylum. The new operation appeared to apply to those who had crossed into the U.S. illegally, rather than those who had presented themselves to U.S. border authorities at official ports of entry. (The latter were already barred from applying for asylum, but not from applying for withholding from removal, if they had passed through Mexico from a third country.) The new expulsion undertaking was named Operation Capio, but its name and details were not publicized. Reportedly, migrants who could make an immediate and compelling case to border authorities that they feared torture if returned to their home countries would be excepted from expulsion; but the process of granting that exception was opaque; those border agents making the decisions were not trained in that type of evaluation; exceptions appeared likely to be rare; being excepted from expulsion would not amount to being granted legal status in the U.S. (for example, under the doctrine of withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture); and no exception was expressly provided for asylum seekers – those who fear “persecution” on internationally specified grounds if returned home. As of April 2, over 7,000 people had been expelled at the border under the new operation. As of April 9, the figure was 10,000. Overall, the development amounted to a material addition to the U.S. administration’s efforts in recent years to deny asylum to those entering from Mexico.

March 20, 2020 – At least two staff members working at U.S. immigration detention centers tested positive for the coronavirus, illustrating the threat to detainees in the often crowded detention centers.
March 21, 2020 – The Department of Justice (DOJ) was reported to have asked Congress for an emergency power to suspend *habeas corpus* – the right of detainees, including those seeking immigration relief – to timely appear before a judge or to obtain release. Many critics objected, on constitutional grounds.

March 26, 2020 – A federal district court judge in New York City ordered the release of 10 immigration detainees from New Jersey jails, on grounds that their pre-existing medical conditions made them especially vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus.

March 29, 2020 – Four out of the thousands of migrant children in federal detention were reported to have tested positive for the coronavirus.

March 31, 2020 – A federal judge in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania ordered the release of 10 detained immigrants in that state who were medically vulnerable to coronavirus infection.

April 9, 2020 – Some 37 ICE detainees were reported to be infected with the coronavirus.