ERITREAN REFUGEES
AND THE WAR IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA

On November 4, 2020, after several years of escalating tension, Ethiopian federal troops invaded the rebellious Ethiopian province of Tigray.

Tigray lies in the northwest corner of Ethiopia, where the country borders Eritrea. It is the region of Ethiopia in which Eritreans fleeing their country first arrive and often remain. The Tigrayans have been generally hospitable to the refugees, and they speak the same language as most of those arriving (Tigrinya).

Eritrean troops assisted in the Ethiopian invasion, and they subsequently invaded as well. At the time of this writing, they remain in theater.

Widespread reports of war crimes against Tigrayans have followed the invasions – arbitrary killings, massacres, rape, rampant looting, destruction of ancient religious sites, and the imposition of forced starvation. Eritrean forces have been implicated in many of those crimes. Eritrean forces have also entered two of the four United Nations-supported refugee camps in northern Tigray, housing Eritreans who had previously fled from their country. Reportedly, the Eritrean military has virtually destroyed those two camps, has executed camp residents perceived as opponents of the Eritrean regime, and has forced the return of many of the refugees to Eritrea, the very country from which they had fled – all are crimes under international law.

In June 2018, a rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea had begun, following the two countries’ 1998-2000 border war and then two decades of bitter hostility. That rapprochement was initially heralded by many as a joyous and stabilizing event. But it is now widely seen as having eventuated in the joint military operation in Tigray that threatens stability: not only within Ethiopia, but across the Horn of Africa.

Since the summer of 2020, when war clouds began gathering, The America Team for Displaced Eritreans has been advocating for the protection of Eritrean refugees in Tigray. That advocacy has intensified since late October.

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