



ERITREAN REFUGEES AND THE WAR IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA



The war.

On November 4, 2020, after several years of escalating tension, Ethiopian federal troops invaded the rebellious Ethiopian province of Tigray. Troops from Eritrea (to the north) and the Ethiopian province of Amhara (to the south) joined in the invasion from the outset.

Widespread reports of war crimes against Tigrayans accompanied and followed the invasions. Arbitrary killings, massacres, systematic rape and gang rape, rampant looting of hospitals, homes, churches, manufacturing facilities and schools, intentional destruction of agricultural capabilities, intentional destruction of ancient religious sites, and the imposition of forced starvation by way of a total blockade of food and medicine were perpetrated by Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces. The Tigrayans as well are reported to have committed atrocities in the neighboring provinces of Amhara and Afar when they went on the offensive there. In all, hundreds of thousands are believed to have died. Eritrean forces have been implicated in the worst of the atrocities against civilians.

The war nominally ended two years after it began, in November 2022, with the defeat of Tigray and an ambiguous cessation of hostilities agreement. But as of this writing, Eritrean and Amhara forces continue to occupy much of Tigrayan territory and continue to perpetrate atrocities there. Federal authorities continue to oppress Tigray, Tigray has not fully disarmed, and Ethiopia has blocked any international mechanism for human rights accountability. Within Tigray, governance is largely dysfunctional, the streets are unsafe, and political discord is rife. Meanwhile – at least in part as an outgrowth of the war – violent ethnic conflicts and human rights atrocities have flowered in Amhara, Oromia and elsewhere in Ethiopia. The country is seen by some as at risk of collapsing.

The Eritrean Refugees.

Tigray lies in the northwest corner of Ethiopia, where the country borders Eritrea. For decades, it was the region of Ethiopia in which Eritreans fleeing acute oppression in their country first arrived and often remained. They lived in four camps that were administered by the Ethiopian government and supported by the United Nations. The Tigrayans were long generally hospitable to the refugees, speaking the same language (Tigrinya) as most of those arriving. At any one time, approximately 100,000 Eritrean refugees lived in Tigray, in depressed but fairly safe circumstances.

The war brought all that to an end. Within weeks after the outset, Eritrean forces entered two of the four camps – the most northerly ones, Shimelba and Hitsats – destroying them, executing camp residents perceived to be opponents of the Eritrean regime, and forcing the return of many of the refugees to Eritrea, the very country from which they had fled. These were all extraordinary developments, rarely seen even in war, and crimes under international law.

Most of the remaining refugees from the two camps fled – perilously – either to Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, or to the two southerly camps in Tigray – Mai Ayni and Adi Harush.

In Addis they were often unwelcome and sometimes sent back to the camps by the Ethiopian government, and many were harassed and even kidnapped by Eritrean agents who were operating freely in the capital. Today, tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees live in Addis, where Eritrean and Ethiopian elements continue to harass the refugees and sometimes reportedly deport them to Eritrea.

In Mai Ayni and Adi Harush, with war all around them, the refugees could barely subsist. The United Nations and international humanitarian organizations had little to no access, and the Ethiopian government abandoned them. They encountered privation, insecurity and targeted atrocities at the hands of Eritrean forces, and to a lesser extent errant Tigrayans. As noted above, for many months the Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces laid siege to Tigray as a whole, blocking food, medicine, electricity, banking and internet service, all of which impacted the Eritrean refugees as well as the Tigrayans. An unknown number starved to death. A massive drought had meanwhile come to the Horn of Africa, adding to the devastation.

At length the refugees, again perilously, moved from the two remaining camps in Tigray even further south, to a site in Amhara known as Alemwach, that the United Nations had created for them mid-war. But there too they faced violence, insecurity, inadequate shelter and insufficient food. In early 2023, the World Food Program suspended all food aid to Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia due to thefts of that aid, seemingly by federal and regional authorities and/or military forces. Although some aid was restored to Tigray in August, the suspension otherwise continued, owing to the apparent refusal by the perpetrators to install or permit corrective measures -- yet again direly impacting the refugees. Some of those encamped at Alemwach continued to starve; and some out of despair moved on, at great risk, to Uganda, Kenya, Libya and Egypt. Only in October 2023 did WFP announce the resumption of food aid to refugee camps in Ethiopia (although not to most of the Ethiopian population).

Looking backward, and forward.

From the early 1990s, Tigrayans had dominated Ethiopia economically and politically. The region's military and politicians had led the country in a brutal border war with Eritrea from 1998 to 2000 (for which Eritrea was likewise at fault); they were authoritarian and often cruel; and Tigray's power and relative prosperity were reviled by Eritrea and resented by other Ethiopians. Tigrayans were ousted from power in April 2018, and in June a formal rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea occurred. That rapprochement – the precise terms of which have never been disclosed – 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 against Tigray, and even, at its core, as having committed Eritrea and Ethiopia to that operation. In the end, Tigray was utterly decimated, and it will likely remain so for decades, if not generations. The Eritrean government may well have also planned as far back as 2018 to decimate the refugee camps in Tigray; those camps will probably never be restored. While Ethiopia is in political and economic shambles, the Eritrean regime appears to be more secure and influential than ever. It enjoys friendly relations and shares strategic discussions with most or all of the other countries in the Horn. In sum, it won the war.

In the summer of 2020, when war clouds were first gathering, The America Team for Displaced Eritreans began advocating for the protection of Eritrean refugees in Tigray. In October, on the eve of the invasion, we began advocating intensively. Eventually, with few refugees remaining in Tigray, we came to advocate for the protection of Eritrean refugees in Amhara and Addis, and we continue to do so. Given the pervasive instability and lawlessness that now characterizes Ethiopia, and the continuing interventions and influence there by Eritrea, we are deeply concerned for the long term future of Eritrean refugees anywhere in the country.

Additional information about the impact of the war on Eritrean refugees is available here:

1. By the America Team for Displaced Eritreans: Chapter 8 at <https://eritreahub.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Tigray-War-and-Regional-Implications-Volume-1.pdf> ; and <https://eritreahub.org/the-plight-of-eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia-hunger-suffering-and-death>
2. By Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray>

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