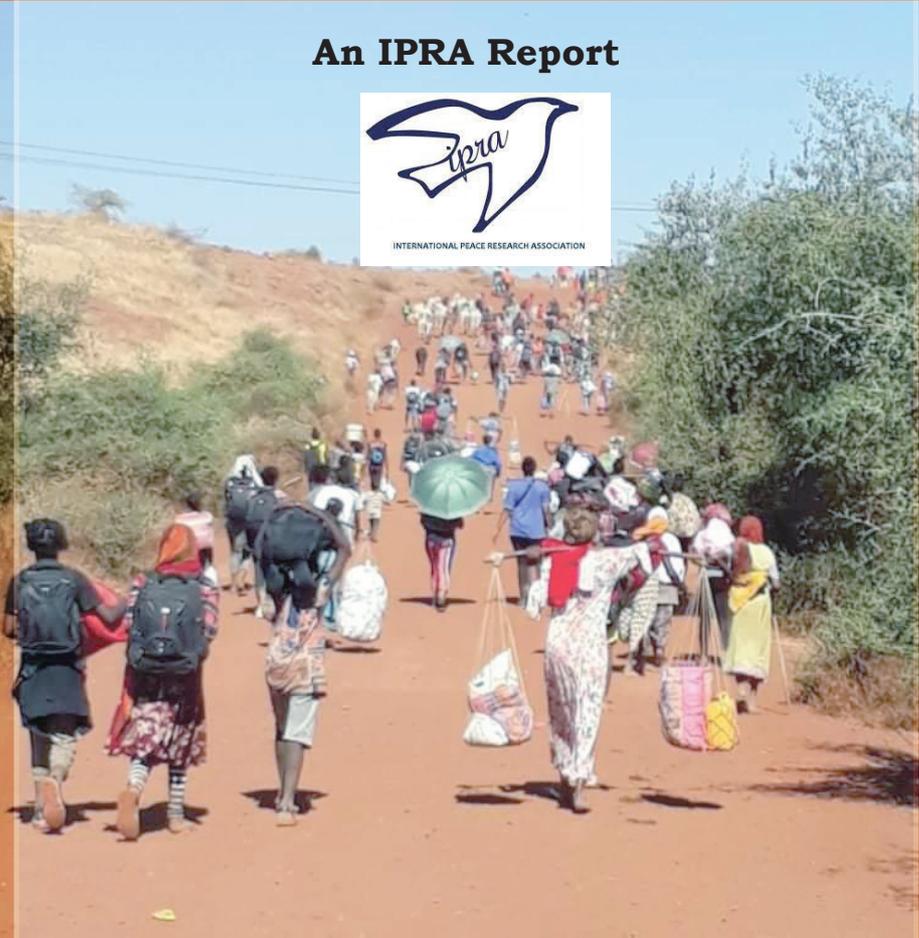


BETWEEN A ROCK & A HARD PLACE

ERITREAN REFUGEES IN TIGRAY & THE ETHIOPIAN CIVIL WAR

An IPRA Report



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AND A HARD PLACE**

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INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH ASSOCIATION



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Cover image credit. Photograph taken by a refugee from Shimelba as they fled the camp.

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark

Warsan Shire, "Home"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Overshadowed by the atrocities of the dreadful civil war in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, Eritrean refugees there have endured – and continue to endure – grave human rights violations in the hands of the various warring sides.
- Before the outbreak of the conflict, Tigray region was home to more than 90,000 Eritrean convention refugees sheltered in four UNHCR camps.
- Following the start of fighting, safety, security and sustenance imperatives compelled many of these refugees to flee the camps.
- Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) soldiers forced others out of two camps, looted UNHCR facilities, and destroyed existing physical infrastructure.
- Whereas Eritrean soldiers targeted some refugees for kidnap and involuntary return to Eritrea, they variously lured others to repatriate, including by promising them blanket amnesty.

- Soldiers of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and Amhara forces abused fleeing Eritrean refugees at various check points, demanded bribes and stole/confiscated their valuables.
- Tigrayan forces, militia and armed civilians from around the camps also launched organized or kneejerk reprisal attacks against the refugees and ransacked the camps of their remaining supplies of basic necessities.
- Many refugee women and girls were sexually assaulted while others were forced to endure “survival sex” because of the precarious situation in which they found themselves and their loved ones.
- Many refugees on the move lost – or do not know the whereabouts of – loved ones and friends.
- In their desperate quest for safe ground and onward migration out of Ethiopia, some refugees have fallen victim to human traffickers, who have started to badger the refugees’ loved ones for ransom.
- Previously separated and unaccompanied minors faced a higher risk of separation from their caregivers, and of being smuggled and trafficked.

- Refugees fled the camps with little to none of their belongings. Those who gathered what little belongings they could lost them to various forces manning the many security checkpoints along the way.
- Refugees who managed to escape the war zone and managed to reach Addis Ababa at great physical and emotional risk to themselves and heavy financial burden to their loved ones were forcibly returned to the very camps that they escaped, government claims of their protection and transfer to the newly instituted refugee camp in Gondar notwithstanding.
- More than a year after the outbreak of the war and dramatic shifts in the balance of power on the ground, the plight of Eritrean refugees persists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Eritrean refugees in Tigray cannot find respite without an immediate cessation of hostilities, an end to the siege on Tigray and lifting of all restrictions on humanitarian access to all civilians across the war-affected regions of the country.
- Apply Ethiopia's "out of camp" policy to Eritrean refugees to allow refugees in the war zone to relocate to safer urban centers where they could more easily access resources inside Ethiopia (UNHCR, ARRA and others) and relatives overseas.
- Evacuate refugees, who are unable and/or unwilling to relocate to the towns, out of the war zone and relocate them to safer more secure parts of the country. Whereas the relocation of refugees to the Amhara region could be fraught with risks and the camps in Afar region are themselves in dire straits, the refugee operations in Gambela and Benshangul Gumuz offer the added advantage of operational agencies in place to provide service.

- Relocating refugees to third countries – with the most vulnerable prioritized – offers the most durable solution and one that UNHCR, ARRA and other Ethiopian government agencies could facilitate with receiving countries.
- In the interim, the federal Ethiopian government (and the Tigray, Afar and Amhara regional states) are duty-bound to allow humanitarian access for the refugees.
- UNHCR, ARRA and other relevant national and international agencies in Ethiopia should resume providing services to refugees, including actively locating and reunifying separated families and unaccompanied minors torn away from their caregivers, calm down anxious refugees and dissuade them from taking hazardous onward migration routes.
- Deploy experts to assist refugees suffering from emotional, physical and psychological traumas that they endured—and many continue to endure.
- Raising funds and mobilizing all other necessary resources to reach refugees in remote and inaccessible areas with humanitarian aid. This will incorporate all the refugees impacted by the war and

integrate local NGOs to support the persons of concern in their localities.

- Actively work to locate and know the conditions of refugees with whom UNHCR lost contact and who are presumed to have been forcibly returned to Eritrea.
- Negotiate and bring about a ceasefire in the areas where refugees are sheltered and all UN agencies (OCHA, UNHCR, UNCHR, UNICEF, etc.) must exert maximum pressure to ensure continued protection of these most vulnerable human beings.
- Conduct an independent investigation into all war crimes and crime against humanity that have been carried out against refugees, including pervasive sexual violence against women and girls, and forcible repatriation to country of origin or refoulment.

INTRODUCTION

Eritrea's wars, military conscription and endless national service, political repression, and economic decay pushed many of its citizens out of the country. Since the early 2000s, Eritrean youth have been fleeing in droves first to Sudan and later to Ethiopia, before resorting – or aiming to resort – to onward migration to other countries. Eritreans voting with their feet found respite in the Afar and Tigray regions of Ethiopia and benefited from generous hospitality of the surrounding Tigrayan and Afari peoples. As far as Tigray's ruling party, the TPLF, and TPLF-dominated EPRDF coalition government were concerned, however, Eritrean youth flight constituted an integral part of their strategy to weaken their archenemy, Eritrea, and its ruling PFDJ.

Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia were considered *prima facie* refugees, deserving of international protections, and housed in camps set up for the purpose. The United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) stepped in to assume responsibility—logistical and legal protection imperatives—for the influx of Eritreans in

cooperation with the federal Ethiopian government's Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA). In 2010, the Ethiopian government permitted Eritreans with the financial means to leave the camps and reside in towns and cities of their choosing; thousands were also allowed to enroll in colleges and universities. As the number of Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia increased, so did the camps with four in Tigray (Shimelba, Hintsats, Mai Ayni, and Adi Harush) and two in Afar (Berahle and Assaita) regions.

Although these camps and their residents lived under UNHCR protection and care (with the assistance of other foreign NGOs), the safety and security of the residents remained under the mercy of TPLF/EPRDF surveillance and control, and Eritrean intelligence infiltration. Administratively, the federal Ethiopian government's ARRA, UNHCR's local counterpart, subtly as well as confrontationally called the shots on the day-to-day management of the camps. As winds of change blew across Ethiopia in 2018, the precarity of Eritrean refugees and the camps that they lived in entered a complex tag of war between the powerful political forces in the country and the region.

Following Dr. Abiy Ahmed's rise to the premiership in April 2018 and rapid normalization of relations between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea, the former ended

the decade and half old policy toward Eritreans fleeing their country.¹ Rumor had been circulating about the imminent closure of Shimelba (that had already been winding down) when, in April 2019, Addis Ababa decided to shutdown Hintsats camp.² The Tigray regional government countered that by assuring the Eritrean refugees that they were welcome across Tigray and that no one would touch them should they choose to stay in that region. The federal government changed the personnel of the federal agency responsible for refugee affairs, ARRA, to enable its implementation of Addis Ababa's directives, often in confrontation with the local Tigrayan authorities and the ruling TPLF.

With little to no influence, UNHCR and its operations in Tigray remained hostage to this tag of war. The lack of unanimity between the federal and

1 Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Unaccompanied Eritrean Children at Risk: Asylum Policy Changes Threaten Eritreans' Rights," 21 April 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/21/ethiopia-unaccompanied-eritrean-children-risk> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

The former prima facie refugee status determination changed to case-by-case refugee status determination, which required every Eritrean refugee to pass through serious interrogation in order to have their refugee status granted.

2 Sara Creta, "Ethiopia plans to close Eritrean refugee camp despite concerns," Al-Jazeera, 19 April 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/19/ethiopia-plans-to-close-eritrean-refugee-camp-despite-concerns> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

regional governments complicated the implementation of the decision to close the two camps. The COVID-19 pandemic indefinitely put that plan off until the outbreak of the conflict in early November 2020. Meanwhile, Eritrean refugees in the Berahle and Assaita camps in the Afar region of Ethiopia fell further to the backburner, suffering severe shortage of basic necessities.

This project started out as a rapid assessment report to document what had transpired in the camps following the outbreak of the conflict in order to draw attention to the plight of Eritrean refugees caught between a rock and a hard place, and to amplify their cries for help. The rapid changes on the ground, and the difficulty of accessing relevant and comparable information on all of the camps necessitated its focus on Shimelba and, later, on Hintsats as well. A set of circumstances made it relatively easier to document the experiences and responses of refugees in Shimelba that had almost exclusively housed Kunama refugees, an ethnic minority from western Eritrea. To a lesser degree, this report also documents refugee experiences in Hintsats camp.

Envisaged as the first empirical research of its kind since the start of the fighting, this report draws from more than 100 research participants, 91 of whom completed structured questionnaires and 17 were interviewed in-depth (14 refugees, 1

former soldier, and 2 diaspora Eritreans). That data is then supplemented with international media coverage and reports of humanitarian organizations on or near the ground. General disinterest on the plight of Eritrean refugees as a topic significantly delayed its publication. Meanwhile, three important reports were published, with two of which (the HRW and Reuters reports) some of the authors of this report actively cooperated and from which this report benefited.

IN THE RUN UP TO THE CONFLICT AND IMMEDIATELY AFTER

After more than two years of contradictory dynamics of forward jostling and backsliding, incendiary discourse, escalating tensions, and open military build-ups, a full-blown civil war erupted on the morning of November 4, 2020. The conflict pitted the TPLF-led regional government of Tigray and its former EPRDF partners, who controlled the federal government in Addis Ababa. The latter declared a “law enforcement” operation against the TPLF regional government for attacking Tigray-based federal forces of the Northern Command.¹ Addis Ababa unleashed its full military might as well as neighboring Eritrea’s and the forces of the Amhara region. With the joint Ethiopian and Eritrean national armies and Amhara special police and militia piercing through Tigray and taking the regional capital Mekelle three weeks later (November 28), the regional government

1 Office of the Prime Minister, “The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray: Causes and Objectives,” November 14, 2020: <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=18555> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

disintegrated and its forces scattered. Not only did the leaders refuse to surrender, but their mobile guerrilla resistance gained steam in the fertile ground of atrocities that the parties meted on the Tigrayan population in the subsequent weeks and months.

The conflict exacted – and continues to exact – a heavy toll on the civilian population of Tigray, comparable to the humanitarian crisis of the mid-1980s if not worse. At the early stage of the conflict, humanitarian organizations reported that the flow of refugees into Sudan had not been witnessed in the past three and half decades.² By February 2021, the total number of Ethiopian refugees in eastern Sudan reached 60,778.³ As of June 2021, the conflict displaced more than 2.2 million civilians, and more than 5.2 million people needed immediate food assistance.⁴ The international community continues to appeal for unfettered

2 UNHCR, *Pace of Ethiopian Refugee Arrivals In Sudan Unseen In The Last Two Decades*, 17 November 2020: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/11/5fb391214/pace-ethiopian-refugee-arrivals-sudan-unseen-decades.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

3 UNHCR, *Sudan: Eastern Border. Ethiopia Situation - Daily New Arrivals Update (as of 05 February 2021)*, *Reliefweb*: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-eastern-border-ethiopia-situation-daily-new-arrivals-update-05-february-2021> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

4 OCHA, “Ethiopia – Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Update. Situation Report,” <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

humanitarian access. Following the dramatic changes in the battlefield balance of power, with Tigrayan forces retaking Mekelle in late June 2021 and near total withdrawal of Ethiopian and Eritrean government forces from Tigray, UN OCHA reported that humanitarians could “access previously hard-to-reach area, with 75 per cent of the population now in zones where relief operations can take place,” but that supplies were “depleting fast, as road access to the region has been curtailed over the last weeks.”⁵ With little aid trickling in, those supplies were indeed depleted; efforts to restock the warehouses and distribution centers were mired in bureaucratic maze, tightening the blockade of the region.

The scale of the calamity that befell the civilian population of Tigray overshadowed the tragedy of Eritrean refugees in the country. The devastating conflict did not spare Eritrean refugees in Tigray as their counterparts in Afar continue to live in the wretched, under-resourced camps. According to credible internal source, UNHCR headcount of Eritrean refugees in Tigray neared 90,000 when the war broke out: Shimelba (8,686), Hintsats (25,152), Mai Ayni (21,725), and Adi

5 OCHA, “Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 19 July 2021,” *ReliefWeb*: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-19-july-2021> (last accessed on 9 January 2022).

Harush (31,997) camps.⁶ Immediately after the outbreak of the conflict, UNHCR staff left the camps in early November 2020,⁷ leaving the refugees to their own devices. With its personnel withdrawn, UNHCR lost contact with—and access to—the camps and observers and humanitarian organizations feared for the fate of the refugees, who had already been in a precarious situation.⁸ In its first regional update, UNHCR highlighted the ominous future that Eritrean refugees faced, citing security challenges and declining food supplies, among others.⁹ Despite the communications blackout, reports of killings and abductions of Eritrean

6 These are UNHCR internal figures for those camps.

7 Chris Melzer, “Assistance Slowly Returns to Refugee Camps in Southern Tigray,” UNHCR, 21 January 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/1/6009544f4/assistance-slowly-returns-refugee-camps-southern-tigray.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

8 Sally Hayden, “Concern Grows For Safety Of Eritrean Refugees As Tigray War Rages,” *Al-Jazeera*, 21 November 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/concern-grows-for-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-as-tigray-war-rages> (last accessed on 6 January 2022); Cara Anna, “UN: Ethiopia’s Victory Claim Doesn’t Mean War Is Finished,” *AP NEWS*, 29 November 2021: <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-abiye-ahmed-ethiopia-asmara-kenya-52bb678b19f48e036470caae4aabdb6a> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

9 Yonas Abiye, “UNHCR Says Staff, Eritrean Refugees Safe for Now but Fears Remain High”. *The Reporter*, 14 November 2020: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/unhcr-says-staff-eritrean-refugees-safe-now-fears-remain-high> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

refugees started to trickle out within weeks of the start of the conflict;¹⁰ implicating EDF, Tigrayan forces and, to some degree, the ENDF. A United Nations team that tried to reach Shimelba camp in early December 2020 to assess conditions for aid deliveries was “denied access and shot at;”¹¹ federal troops detained the team because it reportedly refused to stop at checkpoints.¹² In total darkness from the rest of the world, the camps turned into the proverbial mouth of the shark; many refugees took to fleeing yet again.

10 Cara Anna, “UN: Ethiopia’s Victory Claim Doesn’t Mean War is Finished,” *AP NEWS*, 29 November 2020: <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-abiy-ahmed-ethiopia-asmara-kenya-52bb678b19f48e036470caae4aabdb6a> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

11 Katharine Houreld, “U.N. Security Team Blocked, Shot at Near Ethiopian Refugee Camp,” *Reuters*, 7 December 2020: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-refugees-idUKKBN28H1A1?edition-redirect=uk> (Last accessed on 9 January 2022).

12 Katharine Houreld, “Ethiopia says U.N. Team Shot at in Tigray after Defying Checkpoints,” *Reuters*, 8 December 2020: <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-idUKKBN28I1LZ> (Last accessed on 9 January 2022).

WHEN THE REFUGE IS NO LONGER SAFE

The outbreak of the conflict in early November 2020 worsened the pervading insecurity of the refugees and the precarity of life in the camps in Tigray. Three different reports have variously documented the experience of Eritrean refugees in Shimelba and Hintsats camps in the hands of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) and Tigrayan forces. But none of these reports has generated sufficient attention to their plight as warranting active response from appropriate local, regional or international bodies. In September 2021, Human Right Watch,¹ and, in November 2021, Reuters² released their respective reports, drawing on

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- 1 Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. Need for Urgent Protection, Assistance; Thousands Still Missing” 16 September 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).
 - 2 Ayenat Mersie, Giulia Paravicini and Katharine Houreld, “Dual Agenda: In Ethiopia’s Civil War, Eritrea’s Army Exacted Deadly Vengeance on Old Foes. A Reuters Special Report,” 1 November 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-conflict-eritrea/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

dozens of interviews with victims and relevant other sources. Also in November 2021, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioners for Human Rights (OHCHR) released their joint report on human rights violations in Tigray during the ongoing civil war. However, flawed in methodology, coverage and substance, that report included credible sections on Eritrean refugees that in some respects corroborate the two earlier reports and our own research, and in other respects expand them.³ This section integrates all three sources with our own findings.

Distribution of food and other basic necessities in the refugee camps in Tigray took place in September 2020. Shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, Ethiopian and foreign humanitarian organizations pulled out their personnel before they could distribute another round of food supplies. Indeed, UNHCR announced in late November 2020 that “the last general food

3 EHRC and OHCHR, “Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties,” 3 November 2021: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/report-ethiopian-human-rights-commission-ehrcoffice-united-nations-high-commissioner> (from here on “Report of the Joint Investigation”) (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

distribution in the refugee camps supplied food for the months of October and November”⁴ with little left in the warehouses and even less on the way. In other words, the refugees were already staring at the real prospect of serious food shortage before the outbreak of fighting. Besides the challenges unique to them inside the camps, refugees also suffered the overall consequences of the conflict that affected the Tigrayan population in the war zone. The joint EHRC-OHCHR report best summarized the array of challenges thus:

Eritrean refugees in Shimelba were provided food assistance in September 2020, and many refugees were left without food from the start of the conflict in November 2020. ...Moreover, property and stock belonging to ARRA, UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations were looted and humanitarian personnel were attacked. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) reported that some of their staff were killed in November 2020, due to the conflict. Other challenges faced by refugees included lack of assistance due to the camp’s inaccessibility by ARRA and

4 UNHCR, “UNHCR Regional Update No.4: Ethiopia Situation (Tigray Region), 25-27 November 2020,” *Reliefweb*, 28 November 2020: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-regional-update-4-ethiopia-situation-tigray-region-25-27-november-2020> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

humanitarian organizations for several months; a communications black out; lack of electricity; and absence of banking and other basic services. The combination of these resulted in the interruption of medical and other services leaving refugees in very dire conditions.⁵

As bad as these challenges were, none were worse than the warring sides taking turns to enter the camps and torment their residents. Eritrean refugees faced imminent danger when less than two weeks after the outbreak of the war Eritrean and Tigrayan forces entered Shimelba and Hintsats camps and caused mayhem and destruction in which many refugees were killed, injured and traumatized.

According to refugee witness accounts, on November 17, units of Eritrea's 35th division first entered Shimelba camp and stayed there for a little more than three weeks. The next day, the soldiers summoned all the refugees out of their shelters and gathered them at the football field. The soldiers announced to the refugees that the Eritrean government had pardoned them and that they were now going to return them to Eritrea. The ten-member refugee committee protested that the refugees were not willing to return to Eritrea. The

5 EHCRC and OHCHR, "Report of the Joint Investigation": Paragraph 194.

soldiers first targeted these representatives and forced them into police vehicles bound for Barentu, western Eritrean town that is also capital of the Gash-Barka region. Research participants reported that the soldiers then proceeded to call out names from a list they brought with them. They also started to take away refugees' valuables and office materials, such as generators and computers.

The in-depth interviews revealed that prominent persons and leaders of the refugee community like refugee committee members, leaders of youth associations, musicians and artists were targeted not only by Eritrean forces but also by Tigrayan forces. In the words of one of the interviewees:

I was terrified when they called my husband's name [who was a musician in the camp's "Selam Band"]. They knew everything about him, including his involvement in the youth association. The [Eritrean] soldiers took him with them, when I begged them to leave him alone, one of soldiers slapped me twice, and pointed a gun at me. A few days after my husband's abduction, Tigray militias came to my house and asked me to reveal where I had hidden my husband.

Many Eritrean refugees were abducted by Eritrean soldiers. 90 (98.9%) of the questionnaire

respondents mentioned that they witnessed the forcible return of other refugees to Eritrea. Of the respondents who witnessed these abductions of the refugees, 85 (94.4%) disclosed that the Eritrean soldiers took the persons they knew in the refugee camps. 73 (81.1%) of the respondents mentioned that the soldiers had a list of names of the wanted refugees.

Human Rights Watch and Reuters reports carried the broad contours of these experiences, which the EHRC-OHCHR joint report also confirmed. In the latter's own words, EDF and Tigrayan forces fought pitched battles in and close to Shimelba in

complete disregard for the rights of refugees... Due to damages caused in crossfire, looting of property of humanitarian organizations by Tigray forces and [Tigrayan] civilians, and destruction of its infrastructure, the camp became non-operational. In one instance, five houses of refugees were destroyed by artillery fired by the EDF on Tigray forces stationed close to the camp. Troops from both sides stayed at the camp at different times and harassed refugees. Tigray forces [and civilians] looted property that belonged to humanitarian organizations and other facilities providing services to refugees as well as the personal belongings of refugees.⁶

6 EHRC and OHCHR, "Joint Investigation": Paragraph 189.

The EHRC and OHCHR also reported the “killings of Eritrean refugees in and around the refugee camp by both EDF and Tigray forces between November 2020 to January 2021.” They, moreover, confirmed that an “unknown number of refugees, mainly members of the camp’s refugee central committee, were also abducted and taken to Eritrea by the EDF.”⁷ As we will see in the case of Hintsats, refugees at Shimelba who fled the camp mostly sheltered with their Ethiopian Kunama co-ethnics and relatives in nearby Ethiopian town of Sheraro. When they thought it to be safe, they went back to the camp, looking for food and to collect whatever personal effect they had left behind. They found some food but the camp was in complete disarray with administrators and other service-providing humanitarian organizations withdrawn, the warehouses emptied out, and camp infrastructure dismantled.

Although the chaos at Hintsats camp preceded that in Shimelba and influenced refugee reactions there, Eritrean forces entered the former two days after the latter. On 19 November 2020, EDF units of the same 35th Division entered Hintsats following a brief battle against Tigrayan militia in the nearby town by the same name.

7 EHRC and OHCHR, “Report of the Joint Investigation”: Paragraph 190.

According to one refugee, Eritrean soldiers gathered the residents of that camp and told them that they could go back to Eritrea and that nothing would happen to them if they did so. But if the refugees chose to stay, Eritrean soldiers reportedly warned them, they would not be safe because the Tigrayans were going to try to attack the camp. Fearing that and fearing possible forcible return to Eritrea, some refugees fled the camp to stay away from the Eritrean military; the possible circulation of rumors that Eritrean soldiers were planning to do so for a set date in December may have fueled the rush to escape from them. But wherever they went, they had to contend with the overall insecurity and severe shortage of food supplies. Out of desperation, many of those who fled the camp returned a few days later to collect what little food and personal effects they had left behind. They found out that Eritrean troops had left Hintsats and, in their place, TPLF forces had entered the camp, maltreating the refugees as the EDF had done a few days prior.

As the Eritrean soldiers reportedly warned the camp residents, on November 23, TPLF soldiers attacked the camp during early morning hours. In the ensuing exchange of fire between EDF and the Tigrayan militia inside Hintsats camp, at least nine refugees were killed and 13 injured. One refugee said that the militia called those hiding in the

church to come out and shot them when they did: “I saw with my own eyes as they were being shot and killed,” he said and gave us the first names and regions/towns each came from, details that this project could not corroborate beyond the broad contours of the tragic chain of events. As Eritrean soldiers left the camp the next day, many refugees fled the camp and ran in different directions before Tigrayan forces entered the camp.

Eritrean forces took advantage of the refugees’ knowledge of the area around the camp, including the town of Hintsats, and coerced some of them to serve as guides as they ransacked the town. Some refugees are also said to have willingly taken part either because they knew some of the soldiers or those were their units before they fled Eritrea. Upon EDF’s exit from the camp, Tigrayan forces returned with vengeance; they gathered the refugees they found in the camp and accused them of cooperating with and feeding Eritrean soldiers. Some more of the refugees managed to flee the camp and scattered in the area for shelter. Tigrayan militia captured some of those who fled to nearby villages and hills and herded them back to the camp.

The findings of Human Rights Watch and Reuters “Special Report” are consistent in what happened to refugees next. According to HRW, in the days following Tigrayan reoccupation of the

camp, “Tigrayan militia attacked, arbitrarily detained, and sexually assaulted some of the refugees who had fled, notably around Zelazle and Ziban Gedena, north of Hitsats. They then marched the refugees back to Hitsats.”⁸ The march back to the camp was grueling to the refugees who had been malnourished, tired and/or sick, some of whom either straggled or stayed put only to meet their deaths at the hands of the militia. Speaking to the Reuters research team, a refugee who survived the ordeal put it thus: “Every time we left someone behind, we heard a gunshot. At some point I stopped counting them.”⁹

Once back at the camp, Tigrayan forces ordered all the refugees to stay in their shelters until they were called out. But a few days later, in early January 2021, Eritrean troops and, according to one source, Ethiopian federal soldiers returned to Hitsats camp. They exchanged fire with the Tigrayan militia for hours, in which several more

8 Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. Need for Urgent Protection, Assistance; Thousands Still Missing” 16 September 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

9 Ayenat Mersie, Giulia Paravicini and Katharine Houreld, “Dual Agenda: In Ethiopia’s Civil War, Eritrea’s Army Exacted Deadly Vengeance on Old Foes. A Reuters Special Report,” 1 November 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-conflict-eritrea/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

refugees were killed and injured before the Tigrayans were pushed out. Human Rights Watch reported that “[n]ine refugees were killed and 17 badly injured” in that battle.¹⁰ Eritrean soldiers then ordered all the remaining camp residents to pack up and march along the main road toward Sheraro (Ethiopian border town then under Eritrean control).

The refugees who were injured during Tigrayan assault on the camp and in the subsequent crossfire between the warring sides were returned to Eritrea no questions asked. A few others that the Eritrean soldiers identified were also forcibly put on Eritrea-bound trucks. After eluding his army unit and fleeing to Sudan, an Eritrean former soldier, who said he was 16 years old, recalled how they were told to abduct the refugees: “Our superiors gave us a list of names of refugees that we needed to find in Hintsats refugee camp. I had no idea who they were what they did or what happened to them next. We gathered them, loaded them into truck and drove them to Eritrea.” Some of those forcibly returned fled to Ethiopia again. A research participant from Hintsats camp narrated

10 Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. Need for Urgent Protection, Assistance; Thousands Still Missing” 16 September 2021: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray__ (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

his ordeal of being transported to Eritrea against his will before he fled back to Ethiopia and found his way to Addis Ababa where we linked up with him:

We tried to avoid getting caught in the crossfire by escaping to the hills near Hintsats. When the shooting started near our camp, everyone in the camp wanted to escape, but TPLF forces started shooting at anyone who was running, and I got hit in my leg while running away from the shooting. Close to 20 refugees were injured that day. Later, Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers pushed TPLF forces out of the area and told us that they would transport all the injured to the hospital. But the injured refugees' families insisted on accompanying us to the hospital. The soldiers then decided that each injured refugee would only be accompanied by one family member. My brother accompanied me; we had no idea where they were taking us but assumed somewhere in Ethiopia. Instead, we were shocked when we discovered we were in a hospital in Barentu. I haven't seen my brother since.

Subsequently, according to HRW, "Between January 5 and 8, Eritrean forces destroyed and burned shelters and humanitarian infrastructure in the camp, leaving significant parts of the camp

in ruins.”¹¹ Meanwhile, from Sheraro, the Eritrean military bused some of the refugees back to Eritrea and others escaped back into Ethiopia. Some of those who escaped reached Mai Ayni and Adi Harush camps; and one who reached the former told us how shocked they were to find the situation in that camp worse than it was in Hintsats, both in terms of lack of food and security.

With both Shimelba and Hintsats camps demolished, there was no refugee left by January 2021. When ARRA returned to them in February, it found both camps in ruins and emptied of their residents. Only then did ARRA announce the permanent closure of Shimelba and Hintsats. Refugees who survived the ordeal, escaped the EDF’s forcible return and reported to ARRA were relocated to the remaining Mai Tsebri camps at Adi Harush and Mai Ayni. Many others found their own ways and simply showed up there. Some of those who made it to those camps on their own did not report their arrival to officials there; they simply stayed there with their relatives or acquaintances before moving on.

11 Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. Need for Urgent Protection, Assistance; Thousands Still Missing” 16 September 2021: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray__ (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

Since the beginning of December 2020, international media outlets have been reporting on widespread abductions, killings, and violence against Eritrean refugees.¹² In mid-January 2021, UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi said that he continued “to receive many reliable reports and first-hand accounts of ongoing insecurity and allegations of grave and distressing human rights abuses, including killings, targeted abductions and forced return of refugees to Eritrea.”¹³ In addition to UNHCR reports, aerial photos¹⁴ showed attacks and fire damage on Shimelba and Hintsats camps, confirming Grandi’s claim of “concrete indications of major violations of international law.”¹⁵ In late

12 “‘Overwhelming’ Reports of Killings of Eritreans in Tigray: UN,” *Al-Jazeera*, 11 December 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/11/disturbing-un-says-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-greatly-at-risk> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

13 UNHCR, “Statement Attributable to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on the Situation of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region,” 14 January 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/600052064/statement-situation-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia-tigray-region.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

14 Cara Anna, “Report: Images Show Latest ‘Attack’ on Ethiopia Refugee Camp,” *AP NEWS*, 17 January 2021: <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-africa-ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-581d0134f204f89e9c63fb72972a9521> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

15 UNHCR, “The Refugee Brief,” 15 January 2020: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/the-refugee-brief-15-january-2020-2/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

January 2021 the United Nations announced the disappearance of more than 20,000 Eritrean refugees as a result of waves of fleeing.¹⁶ To-date, notwithstanding the Ethiopian government's claims discussed below, UNHCR has not been able to account for these refugees, the majority of whom are presumed to have been forcibly returned to Eritrea. Yet, it took the High Commissioner's in-person visit to the camps on 2 February 2021 to acknowledge that the refugee camps had been "theater of conflict" and that they had "suffered severe destruction of infrastructure and damage and most likely severe abuse on the refugees that were caught in the crossfire."¹⁷ Even an uptick in international media coverage proved to be fleeting without prompting meaningful action on the part of the international community.¹⁸

16 Al-Jazeera, "Ethiopia: UN Says 20,000 Refugees Missing in Tigray," 2 February 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/2/ethiopia-un-says-20000-refugees-missing-in-tigray> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

17 Filippo Grandi, "Remarks By The UN High Commissioner For Refugees Filippo Grandi at the Press Conference in Addis Ababa," 1 February 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

18 "Slaughtered Like Chickens': Eritrea Heavily Involved in Tigray Conflict, Say Eyewitnesses," *The Guardian*, 21 December 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/21/slaughtered-like-chickens-eritrea-heavily-involved-in-tigray-conflict-say-eyewitnesses>(last accessed on 6 January 2022);

In conclusion, all the major armed actors in the conflict variously targeted Eritrean refugees in Tigray. Even though the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) did not take active part in the fighting in and near the camps, the federal government is not free from the plight that visited Eritrean refugees in Tigray. Ethiopian forces reportedly returned fleeing refugees back to the camps knowing full well the dangers they faced there.¹⁹ However, the EHRC-OHCHR laid the blame squarely on EDF and Tigrayan forces, concluding,

There are reasonable grounds to believe that parties to the conflict have violated the rights of refugees as stipulated under international human rights law, humanitarian law, refugee law, and national laws. ... EDF and Tigray forces

“‘Overwhelming’ Reports of Killings of Eritreans in Tigray: UN,” *Al-Jazeera*, 11 December 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/11/disturbing-un-says-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-greatly-at-risk> (last accessed on 6 January 2022); *VoA*, “Eritrean Refugees Caught in Crossfire of Ethiopia’s Tigray War,” *Voice Of America*, 3 February 2021: https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-tigray_eritrean-refugees-caught-crossfire-ethiopias-tigray-war/6201586.html (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

- 19 “‘Slaughtered Like Chickens’: Eritrea Heavily Involved in Tigray Conflict, Say Eyewitnesses,” *The Guardian*, 21 December 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/21/slaughtered-like-chickens-eritrea-heavily-involved-in-tigray-conflict-say-eyewitnesses> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

violated the civilian character of the camp[s] by their presence in ... and fighting around the camp[s] and put refugees' liberty and security at risk which in turn resulted in their displacement and disappearance. EDF violated the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement* by forcefully returning some Eritrean refugees to Eritrea. On the other hand, Tigrayan forces and civilians looted private property of refugees and property of humanitarian organizations.²⁰

Neither the Eritrean government nor the TPLF responded to the long list of detailed questions from the EHRC-OHCHR Joint Investigative Team (JIT). But both have been blatant in their public responses to the serious charges leveled against them in the report; the TPLF flatly denied the charges and the Eritrean government bizarrely confirmed them. Tigrayan authorities rejected outright all claims that their forces had harmed refugees. Referencing Getachew Reda, Human Rights Watch reported that the TPLF spokesperson had told them that Tigrayan "special forces had not been present in Hitsats or Shimelba during this period. He said the TPLF could not

20 EHRC and OHCHR, "Report of the Joint Investigation": Paragraph 198.

account for the behavior of all allied militia and irregular forces.”²¹

In its ‘rebuttal’ to the joint report of the EHRC and OHCHR, the Eritrean Ministry of Information confirmed the return to Eritrea of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia thus: “Eritrea has compiled an extensive report *from thousands of refugees who returned home* after TPLF militias targeted the camps in retribution to their military losses in the early period of the conflict. In procedural terms, the GOE is opposed to forced repatriation of “refugees”. On the other hand, it recognizes inalienable rights of refugees to return home out of their own volition.”²² (emphasis added).

By contrast, even though the JIT did not disclose the questions it directed to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian federal government appears squeamish at the hint of blame against its ally on the question of Eritrean refugees. Ironically, the account in the joint EHRC-OHCHR report and

21 Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Refugees Targeted in Tigray. Need for Urgent Protection, Assistance; Thousands Still Missing” 16 September 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

22 Ministry of Information of the State of Eritrea, “Press Statement – Eritrea’s Preliminary Response to Joint “EHRC/OHCHR” Report,” 5 November 2021: <https://shabait.com/2021/11/03/press-statement-eritreas-preliminary-response-to-joint-ehrc-ohchr-report/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

Addis Ababa's rebuttal contradict Asmara's ballpark figure by a wide margin. In its response to the EHRC-OHCHR report, the Ethiopian government claimed that as of 19 August 2021 ARRA had accounted for all but 235 of the 19,200 Eritrean refugees dispersed from Shimelba and Hinstats camps between November 2020 and January 2021.²³ In its own words, the Government of Ethiopian (GoE) argued:

regarding the whereabouts of Eritrean refugees from Shimelba and Hitsatse refugee camps, which, before the conflict erupted, had hosted 19,200 refugees: ARRA had endeavored to reach out to all refugees via mass media notices and other means with a view to securely transfer them to other areas - with military escorts. As a result of this initiative, by mid-June 2021, it was possible to transfer 9148 refugees to Mai Ayni and Adi Harish refugee camps, while 9,100 refugees moved, on their own, to Addis Ababa. The GoE has credible reports that some 350 refugees continued to live in Mekelle, Adigrat, and Axum, 200 refugees traveled to Sudan, and 19 refugees travelled to South Sudan. In Total, ARRA has traced and established a full account of 18,965 refugees who had previously lived in both refugee camps. Investigation continues to

23 EHRC and OHCHR, "Report of the Joint Investigation": Annex V - "Response by the Government of Ethiopia" Paragraph 104.

identify the whereabouts of about 235 refugees. *The GoE would like to emphasize that JIT's report needs to capture the full context of the situation on the ground and include these details.*²⁴ (emphasis added).

“Include these details” is exactly what the EHRC-OHCHR Joint Investigative Team (JIT) did in the revised iteration of its report that it released to the public, their statistical discrepancy notwithstanding. The report agreed with – and rationalized – the government figures thus:

At the time relief organizations could access the camp, refugees were initially not coming forward to register for assistance mainly for fear of retaliation from EDF and local civilian population if they were to disclose their identity. Many had not presented themselves as refugees to UNHCR and other organizations and only did so very slowly. Thousands of refugees were unaccounted for over several months and at the time of writing this report, there were still hundreds whose whereabouts were unknown. Many of those who reported to ARRA or UNHCR were relocated to Mai Ayni and Adi Harush as ARRA officially

24 EHRC and OHCHR, “Report of the Joint Investigation”: Annex V – “Response by the Government of Ethiopia” Paragraph 104.

declared the closure of Shimelba and Hitsats camps in February 2021.²⁵

First off, because of the nature of the camps and the people on the move, not even in the best of times did the Ethiopian government, ARRA or UNHCR have such precise figures of the camps' residents and their whereabouts – let alone in a chaotic environment of active conflict. Second, just before the outbreak of the conflict UNHCR figures for the two camps adds up to 33,838 refugees with 8,686 in Shimelba and 25,152 in Hintsats, which leaves 14,638 refugees uncounted in the government's figure of 19,200. Third, the Ethiopian government offers details for 18,817 refugees leaving 383 unaccounted for; but it went on to claim that 18,965 were accounted for with only 235 missing. Finally, all this erroneous mathematical acrobatics and nonexistent statistical precision fall flat in the face of the Eritrean government's public admission that "thousands of refugees ... returned home after TPLF militias targeted the camps in retribution to their military losses in the early period of the conflict."²⁶

25 EHRC and OHCHR, "Report of the Joint Investigation": Paragraph 193.

26 Ministry of Information of the State of Eritrea, "Press Statement – Eritrea's Preliminary Response to Joint "EHRC/OHCHR" Report," 5 November 2021: <https://shabait.com/2021/11/03/press-statement->

Moreover, the dramatic drop in the number of Eritrean refugees in the Mai Tsebri camps, i.e. Mai Ayni and Adi Harush, make the Ethiopian government's, ARRA's, and EHRC-OHCHR's points all the weaker. If 9,148 refugees from Shimelba and Hintsats were transferred to Adi Harish and Mai Ayni refugee camps, how can these entities explain the drop in the residents of the latter two camps by 50% and 31%, respectively? According to UNHCR's data in October 2020, a month before the outbreak of conflict, Adi Harush sheltered a total of 31,997 refugees. A year later, in October 2021, that camp's population dropped to 15,961, of whom 1,024 are identified as Kunama. Similarly, Mai Ayni's residents numbered at 21,725 in October 2020. A year later, in October 2021, the number dropped to 14,765 of whom 874 are identified as Kunama. The new ethnic classification in 2021, when there was none in 2020, shows that the Kunama refugees are from Shimelba and that is the main indicator of Mai Ayni and Adi Harush's intake of refugees from the northerly camps. The new camp that ARRA opened in Dabat, Gondar, has to date received less than 1,000 refugees, which leaves tens of thousands of refugees unaccounted for despite the Ethiopian government's inaccurate figures and improbable claims.

eritreas-preliminary-response-to-joint-ehrc-ohchr-report/ (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

To make matters even worse, conditions at Adi Harush and Mai Ayni remained dire since the start of the conflict, which explains why refugees fled those camps too. After nearly eight months of conflict, when the federal government of Ethiopia declared what it called “unilateral ceasefire” in early July 2021, there had been more than “72,300 Eritrean refugees in the two Mai Tsebri camps [i.e. Mai Ayni and Adi Harush] and other locations across Tigray.”²⁷ A month later, according to OHCHR, “At the end of July, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, expressed concern about the fate of some 24,000 Eritrean refugees in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, who it said have been cut off from humanitarian assistance and are facing intimidation and harassment.”²⁸ Those conditions worsened when the territorial reach of the Ethiopian civil war expanded, and the Mai Tsebri area became – and continues to be – a theatre of intense fighting. As before the July 2021 “unilateral ceasefire”, the situation of the refugees remains

27 UNHCR, “Ethiopia Situation (Tigray Region) 17 May – 14 June,” <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-regional-update-17-ethiopia-situation-tigray-region-17-may-14-june-2021> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

28 “Tigray conflict: all combatants have the obligation to protect Eritrean refugees – UN expert,” 6 August 2021: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27366&LangID=E> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

unknown in definite terms although there are growing indicators that it has not improved.

The international community sounded the alarm bell about the plight of these refugees and the US government specifically expressed concern of mistreatment of the refugees in the camps.²⁹ The Tigrayan government issued a statement (in English, only), stating its commitment to international obligations on the protection and safety of the refugees and their freedom to move should they choose to. As the war continues, the situation on the ground remains volatile and the refugees vulnerable. As recently as 6 January 2022, UNHCR Commission Filippo Grandi reported that federal government's war jets bombed the Mai Ayni refugee camp, killing 3 (2 of whom were children) and wounding 4 others.³⁰ As we continue to monitor developments around all the camps where Eritrean refugees are sheltered, we are learning of worrying developments in and around them. The

29 “[State] Department Press Briefing – July 27, 2021,” 27 July 2021: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-july-27-2021/> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

30 UNHCR, “News Comment by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on Attack that Hit Mai Aini Refugee Camp in Tigray,” 6 January 2022: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/1/61d73df24/news-comment-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-attack-hit-mai.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

town of Berahle in the Afar regional state has exchanged hands between the warring sides with inevitable grave consequences to the refugees there who had already been in dire straits. We are also receiving credible, if only anecdotal at this point, information that refugees in the Mai Tsebri camps in Tigray are being trafficked to Dabat camp in Amhara region for hefty sums, and that the warring sides in the area seem to have a shoot to kill policy against refugees on the move.

Unaccompanied and Separated Children

Some of the main victims of the dislocation and trauma are unaccompanied and separated children in the camps. According to unpublished UNHCR child protection briefing note, close to 40% of the Eritrean refugee population in the camps were children. Of these, nearly 30% were unaccompanied and separated children, whose numbers stood at some 4,700 in late April 2018. According to another unpublished internal report of child protection partner agencies, in October 2020, Shimelba camp alone had 481 unaccompanied and separated children registered of whom 213 were female. Even before the outbreak of the current conflict, these children were at risk of further separation due to smuggling and trafficking on onward migration. UNHCR data reflect the vulnerability of these unaccompanied

children living in nonfamily-based care when compared with children living in family-based care, who were 30% less likely to go on onward migration from the camps. Our own interviews also revealed that previously unaccompanied and separated children, who had been under different care arrangements (foster, voluntary caregiver and children living with their relatives) faced a much higher risk of separation than children living with their primary caregivers.

When war broke out and the refugees dispersed, these children faced a heightened risk of further separation and attendant difficulties. Per our preliminary assessment, of Shimelba's 481 unaccompanied and separated children, only 12 made it to Addis Ababa. Interviews with 3 caregivers (2 female and 1 male) revealed that at the heart of the secondary separation was the spontaneous departure of the unaccompanied and separated children when the war broke out. According to these interviews, most of the Eritrean Kunama children were either returned to the country of origin, Eritrea, or fled to Adi Goshu, an Ethiopian village between Humera and Sheraro, where they had extended families who happen to be Ethiopian Kunama. One caregiver mentioned that a 16-year-old unaccompanied boy was killed in the crossfire between Eritrean soldiers and the Tigrayan militia. Two other research participants

said that his body was discovered near the secondary school and did not receive proper burial.³¹

A single mother from Shimelba among the study participants narrated to us her experience with a separated minor in her family:

We did not have enough food when the war began. My 16-year-old nephew was with me. One night, I told him and other relatives that we run out of food, and we needed to go to Shiraro to see if we could find a place to stay and food to eat. The next day, after packing some of our clothes, I went to his sleeping space, but he was not there. I do not exactly know where he is right now. I heard he fled to a place called Adi-Goshu. He was like my own child, and I took exceptional care of him. He may be fearful of being forced to return to Eritrea.

A key informant/research participant, who had been involved in child protection activities at Shimelba, confirmed that the whereabouts of many unaccompanied and separated refugee children are unknown to their caregivers. This project's effort to find out how many such unaccompanied and separated children from the refugee camp may be

31 Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission, an implementing partner of UNHCR operating on secondary education in Shimelba refugee camp.

in Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps or elsewhere across Ethiopia was not successful due to the communication blackout in Tigray and the overall insecurity across the country. Of all the Eritrean refugees caught up in the current conflict in Ethiopia, these separated and unaccompanied minors face the worst uncertainty and hardship.

Looting and Destruction

Since the start of the conflict, various actors have been perpetrating multiple forms of violence, including looting, vandalism, and destruction of camp infrastructures. The Eritrean troops have been the main looters according to the refugees. According to the interviewees, the Eritrean forces looted whatever materials they wanted since they took control of the refugee camps in mid-November 2020. Eritrean forces reportedly confiscated refugees' personal effects such as cell phones and bicycles. According to the interviewees, Eritrean soldiers took away office supplies, including computers, printers, chairs, tables, file cabinets, and power generators. And they also destroyed camp infrastructure. 85 (93.4%) of the study participants witnessed the demolition of built structure like offices and houses in the refugee camps.³² Such wanton destruction of camp

32 British investigators from the DX Open Network also documented the destruction of refugee facilities, stating

facilities and infrastructure laid the ground for the eviction of the refugees. After regaining access to Shimelba and Hintsats camps in March 2021, UNHCR saw firsthand and corroborated what satellite images had revealed and what the research participants narrated.³³

The violence perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers violates the 1951 Refugee Convention³⁴ and the 1969 African Refugee Convention.³⁵ Both conventions prohibit *refoulement*, the return of refugees in any manner whatsoever to places where their lives or freedoms would be threatened. UNHCR clearly established that refoulment occurs

that structures in Shimelba and Hintsats camps were intentionally targeted. Samuel Gebre, “Satellite Images Show Ethiopia Carnage As Conflict Continues,” *Bloomberg*, 9 January 2021: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-09/satellite-images-show-destruction-of-refugee-camps-in-ethiopia> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

33 UNHCR, “UNHCR Reaches Destroyed Camps in Northern Tigray,” 26 March 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/3/605da0564/unhcr-reaches-destroyed-camps-northern-tigray.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

34 United Nations, “The Refugee Convention,” 1951: <https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

35 African Union, “Convention Governing The Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa,” September 1969: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36400-treaty-0005_-oau_convention_governing_the_specific_aspects_of_refugee_problems_in_africa_e.pdf (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

directly when governments directly reject or expel refugees, and indirectly when they apply intense pressure on protection-seeking people to convince them they have no option but to return to the country where they face a serious risk of harm.³⁶

The study found out that locals and TPLF militias from around the camps, in their turn, plundered and ransacked the refugees' personal items and camp infrastructure. They looted money, jewelry, mobile phones, clothes, utensils, DVD and television sets, and other materials. For instance, an interviewee from Shimelba refugee camp depicts the widespread looting:

Eritrean soldiers ate our food for four days. One morning, they killed seven Tigrayan militias and one refugee and dumped their bodies in the field, around the camp's food distribution area. They then took some of our personal belongings and ordered us to go to Shiraro [still in Ethiopia] or Eritrea, warning us that if we returned TPLF would kill us in retaliation. We locked our doors and left the camp, leaving few of our belongings behind. Few of us returned to the camps, since the situation outside the camp was not improving only to find out that TPLF militias and the locals had taken over the camp the day after we left; they looted everything and torched the

36 Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention: <https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

rest. I was hoping to save at least some photographs, but everything had been reduced to ashes, and I just couldn't! My heart grieved.

Sexual Violence

Eritrean refugee women recounted how they endured horrific gender-based violence and rape, on top of the violations and physical violence that they faced like the rest of their fellow refugees. Ranking UN Human Rights experts agree that women and girls, in general, and Eritrean refugee women and girls, in particular, endured egregious violations in this war: “Internally displaced women and girls in Ethiopia and Eritrean refugee women and girls living in the Tigray region have been particularly exposed to sexual violence. *Eritrean women and girls, specifically, have been seriously affected by the conflict and doubly victimized*”³⁷ (emphasis added).

The research found out that Eritrean soldiers, Tigrayan militias, Amhara militias, ENDF soldiers, locals, and refugees perpetrated sexual violence against refugee women. 75 (82.2%) of the research participants said that they either experienced or witnessed gender-based violence

37 “Tigray Conflict: UN Experts Call for Urgent Action to Stop Violence against Women,” 3 December 2021: [https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27899&LangID=E_\(last accessed on 6 January 2022\).](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27899&LangID=E_(last accessed on 6 January 2022).)

during the war. Of the respondents who witnessed or experienced gender-based violence, rape was the most widespread violence that female refugees experienced although the sensitivity of the topic and cultural inhibition prevented victims from speaking out. 64 (85.3%) of the respondents witnessed rape against female refugees in the camp. 37 (49.3) of the respondents said that they witnessed female refugees subjecting themselves to survival sex with soldiers and militias in order to access food and medication for family members.

Because the responses to structured questionnaire about sexual violence does not accurately reflect the scale of the problem, the researchers interviewed two survivors of such sexual and gender-based violence in the hands of Eritrean soldiers and Tigrayan militias. One of the survivors from Shimelba narrated her experience thus:

First, Eritrean soldiers imprisoned my brother in the former government office [ARRA and NRC] building, on the camp's upper side. I used to go there to inquire about his condition. They had beaten him up and his health was failing. One afternoon, I asked to meet with the leader of the soldiers, and I was allowed into his office. After some discussion, he pulled out his gun and ordered me to take off my clothes. He raped me. After that he called two of his soldiers and left the

office. They also raped me one after another. I passed out. When I regained consciousness, I was half naked on the edge of the office. I have been in a constant physical and emotional pain since then. And my brother has been forcibly returned to Eritrea.

Another survivor also from Shimelba related her ordeal in the hand of Tigrayan forces following Eritrean soldiers' departure from the camp:

Three Tigray militias violently knocked into my house, in one fateful afternoon. I asked them what they wanted. They said they wanted to talk to me and right after I opened the door, they grabbed me to the other side of the house, near the latrine. And they raped me one after another in front of my 6-year-old daughter and my pregnant sister. Since then, my daughter is in a constant fear and nightmare. I would like to get tested for HIV/AIDS and pregnancy, but I do not have enough money.

On probing how she identified if their assailants were Tigrayan or Eritrean, the survivor said that she could tell from their dialect of the Tigrinya language and the military fatigues they wore. She did not report the crime to ARRA or UNHCR because she said she did not trust any of those organizations.

Furthermore, unable to survive on the meager humanitarian supplies available, some of the research participants were forced to engage in survival sex. Sex was also used to escape imprisonment and kidnapping. Three of the study participants narrated their harrowing experiences. One of them, a 21-year-old refugee woman from Shimelba, became sexually involved with Eritrean soldiers to protect herself and her family from danger and to get some food items. She narrates her experience as follows.

When I was walking to buy onions from one of the camp's elderly ladies, a soldier called out to me. He requested my identification card. I told him that my ID card was in my house. He ordered me to get back to him after I collected the onions. I complied with what he said. Then he escorted me to my house, so that I could show him my ID. We went and I showed him my ID. That night, he came to my house and forced me to sleep with him. After that, he came to my house whenever he wanted. I slept with him multiple times to avoid deportation and physical harm. When they left the camp, I escaped to Addis Ababa along with my little brother and sister.

FLIGHT NARRATIVES

The desperate refugees were on their own when UNHCR and other organizations withdrew their personnel from the camps immediately after the outbreak of the conflict in early November 2020.¹ Of the thousands of Eritrean refugees who fled the camps following the outbreak of the conflict, 108 were consulted for this project through 91 questionnaires and 17 interviews. All the respondents indicated that they left their camp within two weeks of the outbreak of the conflict, with 37 (37.40%) leaving the day that fighting erupted while the majority of them, i.e. 47 (51.65%), having stayed behind for two weeks.

64 of the 91 respondents (70.3%) said that they fled the camps because they feared of violence and persecution. The in-depth interviews corroborated this finding, with interviewees revealing their fear of violence, arrest and persecution among the major reasons that

1 Chris Melzer, “Assistance Slowly Returns to Refugee Camps in Southern Tigray,” UNHCR, 21 January 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/1/6009544f4/assistance-slowly-returns-refugee-camps-southern-tigray.html> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

compelled them to leave their camp. To 52 (57.1%) of the respondents, shortage or total lack of basic needs was the push factor out of the camps. With shortage of cash and fast depletion of stocks of food supplies in the camps, refugees dispersed in search of ways to sustain themselves. According to the interviewees, the decision to flee the camp and reach the cities was tough, as it exposed them to exorbitant living cost outside of the camps. The economic strain was especial severe among refugees with large families. The interviewees in this case mentioned that their inability to secure and safeguard food rations for their households forced them to leave the camps with their respective families.

In addition, some refugees testified that they were forced to leave the camps by Eritrean soldiers. In this regard, 62 (68%) of the respondents disclosed that Eritrean soldiers ordered them to leave the camps. The in-depth interviews corroborated these claims and especially established that refugees in Shimelba camp were forced to leave. According to the research participants, Eritrean soldiers told refugees that Eritrea is safe, and that the government had pardoned them. One of the interview participants described events leading to his forced flight in the following manner:

I cannot remember the exact day, but when Eritrean soldiers arrived in the camp, my kids and I were inside our house. As we were hearing gun shots and heavy artilleries from afar, I locked the door from inside. After a couple of hours, they started to call people to come out and aggressively knocked on the locked doors. They gathered us and ordered us to leave the camp and go to Eritrea. They told us that the government of Eritrea had granted amnesty for the Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Right after that, they started to call the name of some refugees, whom they particularly targeted. Some refugees from within the camp helped the soldiers in identifying the ones they wanted.

The exodus of refugee from the camps was so great that UN OCHA expressed concern about it during its 10 December 2020 midday briefing.² UNHCR situation reports similarly documented the enforced dispersal of refugees from the camps.³

Research participants were asked tailored questions to probe possible losses, including losses

2 OCHA, “Daily Noon Briefing Highlights: Ethiopia,” 10 December 2021: <https://www.unocha.org/story/daily-noon-briefing-highlights-ethiopia-3> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

3 UNHCR, “Statement on the Situation of Eritrean Refugees In Ethiopia’s Tigray Region–Ethiopia,” *Reliefweb*, 14 February 2021: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/statement-situation-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia-s-tigray-region> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

of family members and friends during such turbulent times. The study result shows that 58 (63.7%) witnessed or took part in burial of deceased family members, relatives, and friends without proper burial rites because there were no functioning religious institutions to conduct them in the camps. 47 (51.6%) of the respondents fled the camps along with their family members (and other refugees) to improve their chances of overcoming the odds ahead of them. But 52 (57.6%) of the respondents said that they were compelled to leave behind their family members and relatives because of shortage of money and out of concern for the safety of their loved ones on the road. Not only did the conflict, therefore, affected the physical well-being of the refugees, but it also harmed their social relations and sense of relative safety. According to the interviewees' testimony, the conflict destroyed family and group life in the camps, which were essential part of refugee wellbeing and constituted an integral part of their safety net that they built after their initial displacement from Eritrea and settlement in those camps. Combined with these refugees' previous distress of separation and uncertainty about their future, the renewed conflict and the violent encounter that they consequently went through proved to be even more traumatizing, the worst

affected being the abovementioned separated and unaccompanied children.

When the refugees fled their camps, they could only carry a small portion of their belongings with them. 53 (58.2%) of the respondents left the camps without any of their belongings. Whereas 33 (36.2%) of the respondents had a chance to take some of their belongings (clothes and little flour to eat), the remaining 5 (5.5%) said that they took with them most of their meager belongings. Thus, most Eritrean refugees traveled light in their uncertain, dangerous and arduous journeys out of the camps. Study participants consistently related how these personal possessions were confiscated in the various check points that the EDF, ENDF and Amhara regional forces manned. Whatever possessions the refugees were left with, they thus shed them off along the way. All of them arrived in Addis Ababa with nothing other than the clothes on their backs.

Refugees who fled the camps and arrived in major cities were forcibly returned to the unsafe camps that had been engulfed by the fighting around them. Even those who were permitted to leave the camps for legitimate reasons were not spared. A young child in Shimelba with liver disease (hepatitis) had a medical appointment out of camp for November 6. Her mother took her and escaped the camp for the town of Shire. With no

physicians there able to assist her daughter, the mother begged the ENDF for help. One officer helped the mother and child to fly to Debrezeit in a military aircraft where the daughter received treatment before being transported to IOM's office in Addis Ababa. The mother related their story:

After two weeks of staying at IOM's office with other refugees, we were abruptly ordered to go to Adi-Harush refugee camp in a military convoy. I begged the ARRA officer to leave us, and showed him my daughter's medical documents, he refused. We arrived at the camp after a 3-day drive. I was trapped by the war and deterioration of my daughter's health. I decided to flee the camp with my 4 kids via Amhara region. My kids witnessed many dead bodies and injuries on our way. At the first check point the soldiers confiscated all of our belongings. They only let us keep our ID cards and medical documents. Then I arrived in Gondar and with the help of churches, I am currently in Addis Ababa. My daughter missed her [follow-up] medical appointment. This will negatively impact on our resettlement process. I am so doomed, suffering myself, I let my children suffer.

Refugees who left the camp took different mode of transportation, ranging from cars to marching on foot. In the absence of transportation service or relocation assistance by humanitarian

organizations during the active phase of the conflict, refugees fled on foot or hitched a ride with passing vehicles. A refugee who spoke to *The New Humanitarian* in November 2021 said that traveling by bus was “harder due to vehicles being banned on the roads.”⁴ Indeed, 86 (94.5%) of the respondents of this research said that they traveled on foot. Ending in Addis Ababa, the routes of their journey included Mekelle to Aba’ala in Afar region, Shire-Endabguna to Mai-Tsebri and on to Gondar in Amhara region, and Humera to Dansha and on to Gondar as well. Whatever mode of transportation refugees used and whatever route they took, the journey was excruciatingly dangerous and costly for almost all respondents, making it impossible for some refugees to leave the camps.

Persecution, Detention, and Abduction of Eritrean Refugees

Since the outbreak of the war, the life of Eritrean refugees has been fraught with many risks. Several respondents disclosed the persecution, detention, and abduction of refugees. Interviewees and respondents raised detentions in check points when they fled the camps. 29 (31.8%) of the

4 “Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia Cut off from Aid,” *The New Humanitarian*, 30 November 2020: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/30/Ethiopia-Eritrea-refugee-camps-tigray-cut-off> (last accessed on 6 January 2022).

respondents stated that either themselves or refugees they knew were detained in the check points in Amhara and Tigray regions, and on the gates of Addis Ababa. The length of detention varies from a single day to a few weeks. The primary reason for their arrest, according to them, is their⁵ refugee status, which makes their movement unauthorized; and the camps were no longer livable.

One of the research participants was also imprisoned for 10 days in a police station near Addis Ababa, and he paid a bribe of 5000 Ethiopian birr to the police officer in exchange for his release. The participant narrates the incident as follows:

Police officers detained me and four other refugees that came from Hitats refugee camp in Tulu Dimtu police station, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. After two days, the refugees who had been held with me were released, and I learned that they were released because they were able to bribe the police officers. I waited for over a week until my friends were able to raise 5,000 Ethiopian Birr. After taking the bribe, the police officer let me go without giving me release papers.

5 Refugees in Ethiopia were not allowed to move out of the refugee camps unless they carried a pass permit from the country's Administration of Refugee and Returnee Affairs, ARRA.

Traumatic Experiences

Not only did the interviewees and questionnaire respondents endure violence but they also bore witness to violent and traumatizing events meted to their fellow refugees. Almost all respondents, had witnessed or experienced beating, confiscation of personal property, abduction, injuries, robbery, and imprisonment. More specifically, 81(92%) of the respondents witnessed gunshot wounds and or corpses of their fellow refugees. 67 (76.1%) of the respondents said they saw gunshot wounds and the corpses of local community members. Refugee children were not spared the grotesque scenes that their adult counterparts witnessed. Even though these encounters do not capture the full scale of violence that refugees endured, the trauma of bearing witness to them is widespread. The interviewees revealed that the corpses were deliberately left unburied for several days.

In a bleaker account, one of the study participants witnessed soldiers fatally shooting her husband in front of their children in Selekhekha, near Axum. According to her, they travelled as a family from town to town in search of functioning hospitals that could attend to their medical needs (from Shire to Adigrat and then to Axum) until they found themselves

caught up in active conflict in Axum. We had sought refuge for a day in one of Axum's

neighborhoods when Amharic speaking soldiers came, searching for TPLF militias. They found two of them and shot them right away. After that they started to interrogate every one of us. When they interrogated my husband, he told them that he was a refugee and had documents. Unsatisfied by his answer, they started to intimidate him by pointing a gun at him and asked him to tell them the truth. I was weeping and screaming at them to leave him alone, they chuckled at me and shot him in front of my eyes and his children.

Other refugees witnessed the death of their fellow refugees during their arduous journeys of escaping from the fighting. Some refugees died due to lack of access to health centers and medications, and lack of food. 70 (76.9%) of the respondents of this study encountered or knew refugees who died because of preventable causes had the war not compromised their access to basic medical services.

CURRENT NEEDS OF THE REFUGEES

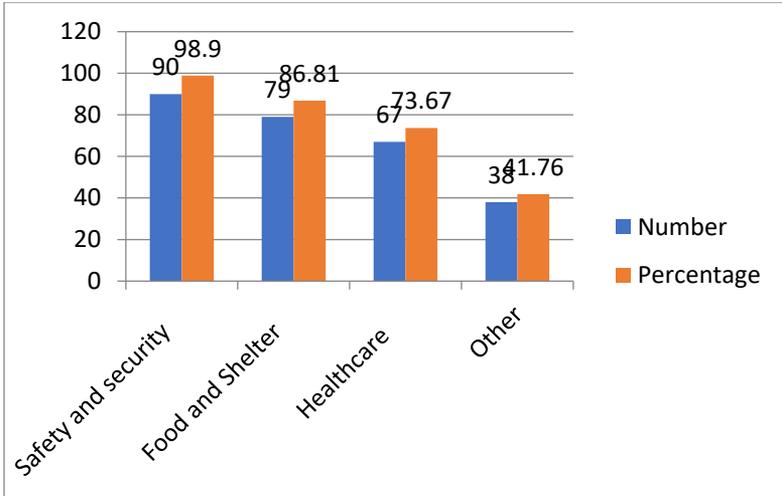
Overwhelmed by a series of seemingly unending needs, Eritrean refugees under the prevailing conditions of war and further dislocation have struggled to articulate their priorities. Yet, as in most conflict situations, safety and security was the topmost priority to 90 (98.9%) of the study respondents. According to the refugees, the government agency that was supposed to protect refugees forcibly returned them from Addis Ababa to the war-torn region where the two remaining refugee camps are located. One of the interviewees mentioned that most of the refugees were communicating only with the UNHCR out of fear that the government agency forcibly returns them to the conflict zone. Their second priority is food and shelter, with 84 (92.3%) of them facing serious challenges finding their daily meals. As a female interviewee put it,

We had no reserve grain or flour when the war broke out. I was worried. I had nothing to give my kids. On the last day before we left the camp, I simply cut the moringa leaves and boiled it. I

chopped it as though it was spinach. It was so salty that my children couldn't eat it. Watching your children starve is the most painful. We left for Adi Goshu that same night [in hopes of finding some food].

To overcome their problems with shelter, 79 (86.8%) respondents said that they were renting accommodation from the local communities by living in groups to share the costs. One of the study participants said that they lived in a room with nine other people and pay 6000 Ethiopian birr per month. Most of them pay their rent with money from relatives living overseas, the support from religious institution, and from other generous individuals. The tragic story of a single mother of three in her own words is illustrative:

I left Hintsats with my children, and we were fortunate to arrive in Addis Ababa, but we now sleep on the street since we cannot afford to rent or buy food. That is why I go to church every day to beg. I have contacted ARRA and UNHCR, but so far nothing has been offered other than a temporary ID since I lost all of my documents and belongings as a result of the war.



Graph—Priority of refugees immediate needs

The third priority was healthcare. 67 (73.63%) participants need immediate medical attention. According to the interviewees, there is high demand for health services among refugees many of whom suffer from chronic illnesses, such as diabetics, HIV/AIDS and TB. These refugees were unable to access medical services, and some of them died during the war due to lack of regular medications that they were supposed to take. One of the in-depth interview participants mentioned that he had lost his diabetic aunt due to the unavailability of the medication she used to take on a daily basis.

FROM FLATTENED CAMPS TO THE DEEP BLUE SEA

The respondents were asked about their future plan and the status of their current resettlement status being processed by the UNHCR. Only 22 (24.1%) of the respondents are in UNHCR's current pool for resettlement in a third country through legal, safe and proper mechanisms. Whereas none of the respondents showed any interest to returning to the refugee camps, only 20 (21.9%) of them wished to stay put in Addis Ababa, which remains a most feasible option. 70 (76%) of the refugee respondents wanted to be relocated to a third country, which is one of the durable solutions even if unlikely under the current conditions. Not only have an unknown number of refugees fled the camps and perilously gone on onward migration to third countries but many of the respondents wish to do the same for lack of hope and confidence in the agencies that are supposed to support them. One of the study participants best captured these feelings and plans:

We don't trust ARRA and UNHCR and we don't see any hope for us here in Addis. The majority of our friends have already fled to Sudan with the hope of reaching Libya, Uganda or anywhere else. Some of our friends have been kidnapped by the smugglers in Gondar area and their family members are being asked to pay ransom of 7,000 USD a person.

Indeed, this research found that some of the refugees, who survived the war in Tigray and reached Addis Ababa, decided to cross the Mediterranean through the deadly Libyan route.

Three research participants shared harrowing accounts of their relatives' experience of abuse during the smuggling process, amounting to kidnapping for ransom. After three months of agonizing separation since the start of the war in November 2020, one of the interviewees was able to relocate his younger brothers, aged 15 and 16, from the Hintsats refugee camp to Addis Ababa. After a two-month stay in their older brother's rented residence, the younger brothers were trafficked to Libya. After a few days, the smuggler's phone call alerted their elder brother to the fact that his brothers had been trafficked and were held hostage. The smugglers demanded \$7,000 each. He unsuccessfully pleaded with the smuggler to return his brothers to Ethiopia or Sudan. He had no choice other than to pay the \$14,000. By the time of our

interview in June 2021, he was waiting to hear from his brothers in Libya.

Similar stories abound among diaspora Eritreans. This project heard from Eritreans in Sweden and the UK, who were asked to pay hefty ransoms to smugglers so that their relatives could either be taken to and let go in Libya or returned to Ethiopia or Sudan. An Eritrean living in Sweden was asked to pay \$10,000 for his 15 years old cousin, who had been living in Hintsats refugee camp. The other Eritrean living in UK was asked to pay \$5,000 to return his 16 years old brother back to Ethiopia. In both cases, the hostages' families were unaware that their loved ones had left Addis Ababa until they heard from the smugglers. This study observed many such escape to the unknown rather than the hardship and humiliation in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of the war between the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray on Eritrean refugees, who have been encamped in Tigray region for decades. The study employed mixed research method and generated empirical data from the experiences of research participants. The study found out that the majority of the refugees fled their camps because they feared violence and persecution, shortage of basic needs such as food, and because Eritrean troops ordered them to vacate the camps. The majority of the respondents stated that they had to leave their loved ones behind, and, in this context, a higher percentage of unaccompanied children faced the risk of being separated from their caregivers.

In addition to the tragedies of separation, the refugees were traumatized by events of the war and the violence they endured and witnessed all around them. Corpses were left on the ground for several days without a burial to terrorize the refugees and local community members. Most of the respondents witnessed these bodies of refugees and members of local communities.

Eritrean refugees in Tigray endured grave human rights violations that human rights bodies did investigate and the media did not adequately document for a whole year. They were abused and tortured, and Eritrean refugee women faced sexual assault and rape in the hands of Eritrean, ENDF, Tigrayan and Amhara forces as well as community members and fellow refugees. Many of them also endured survival sex with the various armed groups. Other forms of abuse included confiscation of belongings, detention in various check points, and abduction. Deliberately damaging refugee properties, camp infrastructures were also part of the violence perpetrated against the refugees, who said safety and security were their primary needs. Lack of shelter is the other major problem that refugees continued to suffer. In the face of these daunting challenges and the present danger of forcible return to Eritrea, it is little wonder that the majority of the refugees (more than 70% of the respondents) wish to be relocated to a third country.

Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia are victims of the ongoing war, deserving of the international community's sustained attention, support and care. And the conflict continues to exact a heavy and inordinate toll on them in Tigray, Afar and Amhara regions

A NOTE ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study employed concurrent mixed research methods. A structured questionnaire and an in-depth interview were used to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. The report offers an integrated analysis of the data from both the structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews as well as from secondary or desktop research on media and other reports.

The research employed convenient sampling technique and generated data from the refugees who fled the camps in Tigray and dispersed across Addis Ababa. The researchers conducted the in-depth interviews with selected respondents to showcase the range of hardships that refugees experienced during the war. The researchers were prompted to use convenient sampling because of the ongoing conflict, and the consequent difficulties for research. The conflict made it difficult to get study volunteers who could participate in the research process live and without any fear. Those challenges are compounded by the refugees' settlement in various corners of Addis Ababa.

The researchers utilized paperless data collection technique, known as Kobo toolbox. The toolbox is noted for its suitability in collecting data in difficult and emergency situations such as the conflict in Tigray. To that end, prior to the data collection, the researchers trained 5 enumerators on how to utilize the data collection toolbox. To test the relevance and accuracy of the training, the enumerators were dispatched to collect test data before they engage in actual data collection process.

Data that has been well checked and validated is the basic foundation of the data analysis, and having this in mind, the following crucial measures have been taken from the data collection stage to the final analysis. The researchers used skip and validation method in order to maintain the accuracy of the data collection process using Kobo toolbox. Extreme figures and outliers are cross checked and cleaned from the data set before analysis to avoid misleading and biased outcomes.

A total of 108 refugees participated in the research. The structured questionnaire was completed by 91 refugees, 38 (41.7%) of whom were female. These participants spent varying lengths of time in the refugee camps in Tigray. 49 (45.4%) of the respondents stayed in the camps for 3-5 years. 21 (23%) of them remained in the camp for 6-10

years. 17 (18.6%) respondents were sheltered in the camps for 2 years or less, and the remaining 8 (8.7%) respondents stayed there for more than 10 years. 87 (95.6%) of them were from Shimelba refugee camp and the remaining 4 (4.4%) were from Hintsats refugee camp.

In addition, the study also conducted in depth interviews with fourteen refugees. Due to security reason and the dispersal of the refugees, we were compelled to use convenient sampling methods. To that end, nine female and five male refugees were selected for semi-structured in-depth interview. In order to fuse the findings with the ongoing changes, we also consulted an Eritrean soldier who escaped from the war zone, an Eritrean diaspora from UK and another from Sweden, who were asked to pay ransom by the traffickers. In the data interpretation and analysis, we used Pivot tables as springboard and generated demi tables, graphs and percentages. For simplicity and readability, we have avoided using these figures thus generated, opting the narrative form instead.

Eritrea's wars, military conscription and endless national service, political repression, and economic decay pushed many of its citizens out of the country. Since the early 2000s, Eritrean youth have been fleeing in droves first to Sudan and later to Ethiopia, before resorting—or aiming to resort—to onward migration to other countries. Eritreans voting with their feet found respite in the Afar and Tigray regions of Ethiopia and benefited from generous hospitality of the surrounding Tigrayan and Afari peoples. As far as Tigray's ruling party, the TPLF, and TPLF-dominated EPRDF coalition government were concerned, however, Eritrean youth flight constituted an integral part of their strategy to weaken their archenemy, Eritrea, and its ruling PFDJ.

—*From the Introduction*

