



Human Rights Concern Eritrea
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To: HE Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General

CC: Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Hon. Maya Sahli-Fadel, Commissioner, Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons and Migrant in Africa
Hon. Jamesina Essie L. King, Commissioner
Hon. Mudford Zachariah Mwandenga, Commissioner
Mr. Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Eritrea

Your Excellency

We are organisations and individuals who advocate for the rights, fundamental freedoms and wellbeing of the people of Eritrea, both at home and in the diaspora.

We are deeply troubled by current events in Ethiopia's Tigray region, where an armed conflict has been ongoing since 4 November.

During such crises, the most vulnerable invariably suffer disproportionately. While we applaud the fact that the suffering of Tigrayan civilians has, rightly, become the focus of much-needed international attention, we are appealing for a similar level of concern for the plight of Eritreans who have sought refuge in Ethiopia from a regime deemed by a United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry to have committed crimes against humanity, and whose position is now exceptionally precarious.

Communications in the Tigray area were disabled once the conflict began, effectively obscuring how events in the area are unfolding. Nevertheless, alarming accounts have emerged from Tigrayans seeking refuge in Sudan of indiscriminate violence targeting civilians, including looting, rape, and extrajudicial executions, some of which may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity. Additionally, access to electricity, banking services, and water supplies are suspended, causing further hardship, while fighting has inhibited safe travel both into and around the region.

In the midst of this conflict the situation of some 100,000 Eritrean refugees in Tigray, most of whom live in four UN-sponsored refugee camps and many of whom are unaccompanied minors, has deteriorated markedly. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, as the friendship between the Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders deepened – and despite an ongoing human rights crisis in Eritrea – Ethiopia had ended its policy of granting asylum automatically to Eritrean refugees. The government had also announced plans to relocate over 25,000 residents of Hitsats Camp to Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, even though both camps are close to capacity, and lack necessary infrastructure, including sufficient water.

The plight of these refugees deteriorated further once the fighting began. The violence has prevented the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the

Ethiopian Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) from accessing the camps to restock monthly food rations, which are fast depleting. Worse still, early warnings from credible sources of the presence of thousands of Eritrean soldiers in the area failed to elicit timely international interventions, placing an already vulnerable community in critical danger.

Following initial confirmations of attacks and raids by Eritrean forces on Hitsats and Shimelba camps and of the bombing of Adi Harush camp, reports are emerging that a significant number of refugees may have been seized at gunpoint from Hitsats, Shimelba and Shire town, and either forced onto the front lines of the fighting, or forcibly returned to Eritrea, where they will inevitably face indefinite detention, forced conscription, torture and other inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment, or death. Credible reports also indicate that Eritreans who had settled in the city of Adigrat have been rounded up by Eritrean soldiers and forcibly returned.

We therefore appeal to you to remind the Ethiopian authorities of their obligations under the African and UN Refugee Conventions, urging them to open a safe humanitarian corridor to these camps so that the UNHCR and other aid agencies can replenish food stocks, provide medical attention, and evacuate any refugees in need of critical care.

The Ethiopian government must also be urged to prioritise the protection of this vulnerable community within its borders, and to ensure that these refugees, who have a well-founded fear of persecution, are not returned forcibly to Eritrea in violation of regional and international treaties to which Ethiopia is party.

Finally, given the competing narratives with regard to current events in Tigray, Ethiopia must be persuaded to fully restore communications and other suspended services to Tigray, and to facilitate independent investigation and verification of the wellbeing of refugees and civilians by African Commission and UN special procedures, including the Special Rapporteur On Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons And Migrants In Africa and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely and respectfully

Lord Alton of Liverpool

CSW

Eritrean Community Connections (ECC)

Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRCE)

Nightingale Ministries

Rev Daniel Habtey, Elim Ministries

Release Eritrea

Eritrea Focus

SeReT Foundation