

Tigray Situation Update #2

18 November 2020

Background

The armed conflict which began late 3 November 2020 in Ethiopia's Tigray region, and the subsequent military offensive ordered by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF) against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), continues unabated. After the Ethiopian Parliament voted to dissolve the Government of the Tigray region on 7 November, the Prime Minister publicly appointed Dr. Mulu Nega as the Chief Executive of the Provisional Administration of Tigray National Regional State on 13 November.

On the same day, the TPLF Spokesperson, Getachew Reda, indicated in a statement that the TPLF would launch missile attacks into Eritrea. That night, rocket fire hit both Bahir Dar and Gondar airports in Amhara region neighbouring Tigray, for which the TPLF publicly took responsibility. On 14 November, the Eritrean capital Asmara was reportedly hit by rocket fire, for which the TPLF also took responsibility.

The UN Human Rights Commissioner, Michele Bachelet, noted increasing alarm at the Tigray situation in a statement on 13 November, she commented that there was "a risk this situation will spiral totally out of control, leading to heavy casualties and destruction, as well as mass displacement within Ethiopia itself and across borders". The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock also released a statement on 17 November calling for "full access to reach people in need wherever they are; safe passage for civilians seeking assistance; and the security of aid workers".

It is feared the number of those internally displaced inside Tigray from the fighting is growing daily, with limited comprehensive information on numbers or casualties. At the same time, over 27,000 Ethiopians have sought safety in Eastern Sudan from Ethiopia, with numbers of refugees expected to rise while the conflict continues.

Ethiopia is home to 178,315 Eritrean refugees across the country, equal to 22% of the total refugee population in Ethiopia of 796,437. There are 96,223 Eritrean refugees in Tigray, sheltered mainly in four refugee camps in the North Eastern part of the Tigray Region. Shimelba (population 8,702), Mai-Aini (21,682), Adi-Harush (32,167) and Hitsats (25,248) camps were established between 2004 and 2013. There are 8,424 refugees residing in the Tigray Region benefitting from the Government's Out of Camp Policy allowing refugees to live in communities rather than being restricted to camps. Recent reports indicate there are some 2,000 Eritrean asylum seekers currently stranded at the border with Eritrea. The remaining Eritrean refugees outside Tigray, 82,092, live predominately in the next-door region of Afar (approximately 54,000) and in the capital Addis Ababa (approximately 28,000). Before the onset of the conflict, Tigray also counted 100,000 Internally displaced persons among the population.

UNHCR has a Sub-Office in Shire and two Field Offices: in Embamadre (in proximity to the two camps of Mai-Aini and Adi-Harush) and Mekelle, and satellite offices in Shimelba and Hitsats camps. There is also a UNHCR Registration centre at Endabaguna, in central Shire. At the time of writing, critical staff are in Shire, Mekelle and Semera in Afar region.

Current Response

UNHCR is leading a daily inter-agency coordination cell in Shire to discuss the evolving situation, which involves both refugee issues and the emerging IDP situation. The numbers of internally displaced persons have been growing in Shire town, with unconfirmed reported numbers in the thousands. UNHCR is coordinating with partners and preparing for distribution of core relief items depending on stocks and if security allows.

UNHCR, in partnership with the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), UN agencies and NGO partners is continuing to extend protection and humanitarian assistance to over 96,000 Eritrean refugees who are mostly sheltered in the refugee camps, and in the host communities in Tigray. However, the ability to assist both refugees and the internally displaced is greatly constrained. Staff from field locations are coordinating closely with ARRA for only day missions if necessary, but for the time being are not staying overnight in Embamadre Field Office or Hitsats Field Unit.

Due to the deteriorating security environment, all humanitarian staff from UNHCR, ARRA, WFP and their NGO partners have been relocated to Shire from Shimelba camp. UNHCR continues to have access permission to the other three refugee camps in Tigray. However, with the expanding conflict, more limited staff presence, and lack of basic necessities such as fuel means the continuity of services are being compromised.

In Adi Harush, Mai Aini and Hitsats camps, UNHCR and ARRA continue to deliver WASH and child protection services in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Development and Inter-Aid Church Commission (DICAC) and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). Schools remain open for Grades 8 and 12.

UNHCR staff provide daily counseling to refugees and asylum seekers stranded in Shire since the outbreak of conflict. UNHCR is actively advising on transportation options for movement to the camps and is working in coordination with IOM to organize movement. Some 90 refugees were transferred from urban settings, where they felt insecure, to the camps since the start of the conflict.

The growing number of IDPs in the area is also of concern. UNHCR and IOM are working on emergency tracking tools to allow their registration and counting. Under the coordination of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERC), UNHCR is working to deliver Core Relief Items (CRIs) for 5,000 IDPs in Shire. An emergency centre has been set up by ERC in Shire and has, so far, been equipped with 500 mattresses and 500 First Aid Kits. Combined efforts of humanitarian actors are allowing the delivery of water, soap and biscuits and other basic items.

Issues and Challenges

- The further deterioration of the security situation has forced UNHCR and partners to relocate non-essential staff from the office in Shire.
- With the numbers of displaced persons growing and access being curtailed by air and road, the need to be able to move response items into Tigray is ever more critical.
- Telephone and internet services have been down for two weeks, and communication remains an overriding challenge. Within this communications blackout, several news and erroneous information

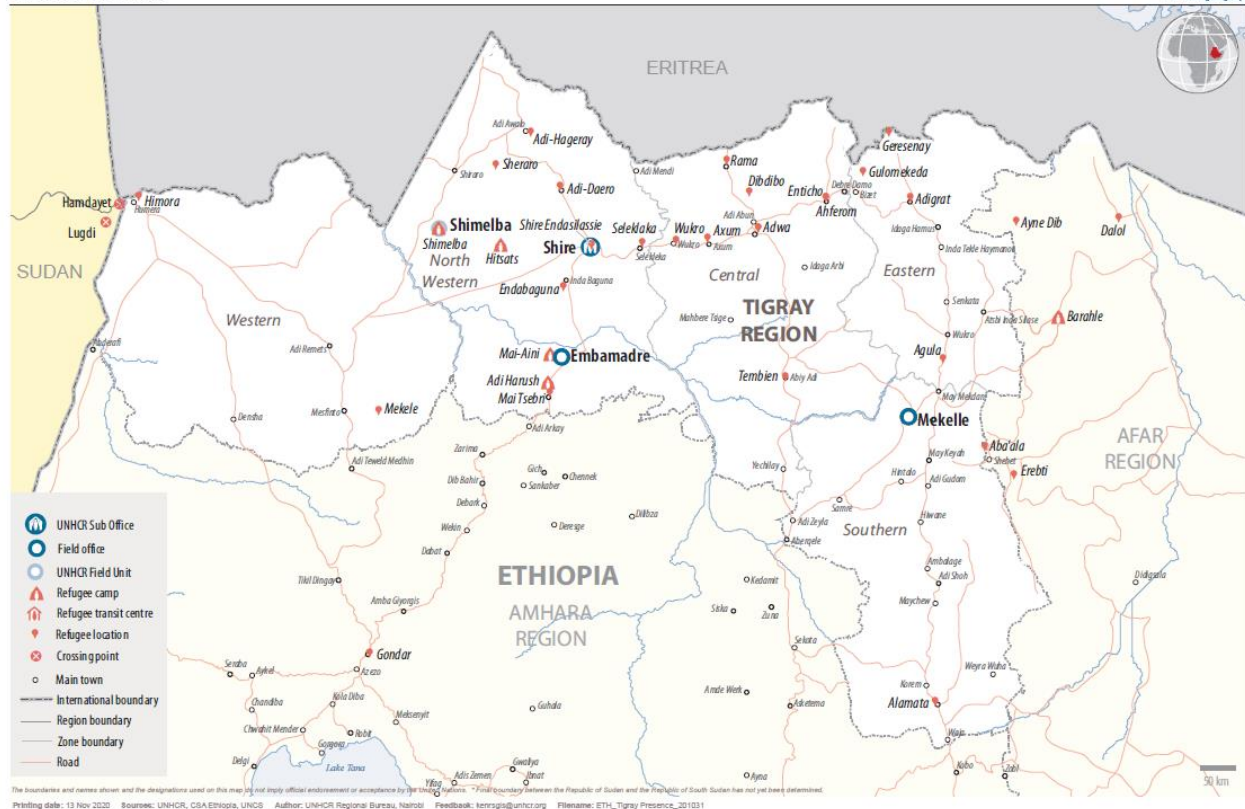
have been circulated on social media related to UNHCR, and UNHCR urges those using social media to share information responsibly and from corroborated and trusted sources only.

- The lack of access to fuel is now critical and will cause UNHCR operations to come to standstill without replenishments within the next week. It will also cause major disruptions to available services in the camps. The shortages of fuel and vehicles, combined with the security situation, is hampering the ability of UNHCR and ARRA to relocate refugees from Shimelba.
- Refugee incentive workers provide a significant amount of support and outreach to People with Specific Needs and Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) and survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in the camps. Lack of banking services has led to an inability to provide incentives, leading to concerns that community structures may collapse, leaving vulnerable populations without support during a critical time.
- UNHCR is part of the overall contingency planning exercise that is taking place for the Tigray region, facilitated by OCHA. At the same time a refugee specific contingency plan is being prepared, both for inside Ethiopia and in collaboration with UNHCR offices in surrounding countries.

Ethiopia Operation:

Tigray Presence

as of November 2020



CONTACTS

Juliette Stevenson, Senior External Relations Officer,
stevenson@unhcr.org