Following the 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea more than 60,000 Eritrean refugees arrived in Ethiopia. Thousands continue to arrive every month. They live under harsh conditions that call for humanitarian action.

In July 2018, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship, ending a 20-year standoff. Both governments pulled back their armies from one of the world’s most militarized border zones, officially ending hostilities. Phone lines reopened, families reunited, and people in both countries celebrated the hopeful development. Since the peace agreement, however, the early optimism has been hampered by domestic challenges in both countries. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia is preoccupied with internal instability and disputes exacerbated by the return to Ethiopia of vulnerable Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, women, elderly, disabled, and children need urgent humanitarian assistance, including shelters, food, water, sanitation, energy, and health care.

Funds are needed for UNHCR, partner organizations, and ARRA to address continuous refugee arrivals in Ethiopia and the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Donor countries should put pressure on Ethiopia to reintroduce prima facie recognition and allow access to protection, while resettlement quotas abroad should be increased.

Humanitarian support and emergency shelters should be provided in transit locations for smuggled and trafficked Eritreans in need of urgent protection.
ethno-nationalist opposition leaders and their armed groups from abroad. On his part, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea is focused on domestic security and the possible spillover from the unrest in Ethiopia. Another obstacle is that the Ethiopian Tigray Region, which borders with Eritrea, has not actively supported and engaged in the peace deal due to its uneasy relations with the federal government in Addis Ababa and the Eritrean regime in Asmara. The peace deal may thus be effective on a state level but it has not yet benefitted ordinary people in the affected border regions.

**Tensions between refugees and host communities**

Since the underlying problems in Eritrea, such as open-ended military services, and desperate socioeconomic and political conditions, have not yet improved the open borders initially intensified mass flights of Eritreans to Ethiopia. According to UNHCR, about 1,500 Eritreans fled out of the country daily in the months following the agreement. A few months later, the borders closed again on the Eritrean side. Refugee flights, however, have continued and remain considerable today. In the first quarter of 2020, about 9,463 new asylum seekers from Eritrea have sought refuge in Ethiopia, children accounting for nearly one third. Because of overcrowding and harsh living conditions in the ill-equipped refugee camps, many Eritreans increasingly avoid registering at the border points and look for informal settlement while others leave the camps after having registered and being formally admitted. They settle in major towns in the Tigray Region or move to Addis Ababa, where they look for employment in garages, shops, factories, hair salons, as waiters or street vendors, or seek employment as house maids. Thus competing with Ethiopian citizens, already struggling with unemployment and poor livelihood opportunities. Language barriers, limited access to formal employment in public sectors and an absence of labour protection expose refugees to workplace discrimination, low wages or summary dismissal. Even though recent legal provisions give refugees the right to work and live out of camps, it has not been properly implemented. Lack of access to business licenses also becomes an obstacle for refugees to establish their own small-scale enterprises. Local residents in refugee areas complain and attribute the skyrocketing housing rents to the influx of Eritrean refugees who have access to remittances. As a security officer in the Tigray Regional State said, “For many years the Tigray people welcomed their Eritrean brothers and sisters and helped them to feel at home and integrate fast. However, now locals complain Eritreans are taking not just their lands and jobs but also aggravating inflations and increasing living costs.” Some locals in the Tigray Region attribute rising crime levels in Mekele town to the new arrivals.

**Shortages in camps in Ethiopia**

Eritrean flights to Ethiopia have increased the burden on the reception system which are already suffering from shortage of basic services such as shelters, food, water, and sanitation. Camp authorities report that there is a lack of emergency and transitional shelters that push refugees either to live in substandard shelters or to move out of the camps and into host communities and rent accommodation by themselves, which in turn become another source of host-refugee conflicts due to soaring house rents. Camps are lacking adequate sustainable water and sanitation services too. Many Eritrean refugees queue for water for hours and sometimes return with nothing. Regarding sanitation and latrine services, the household coverage especially in the Tigray region is substantially below minimum standards. There is also shortage of electricity for food preparation and lighting. Combined with a ban on collecting or cutting wood, the situation is forcing poorer refugees to sell food rations to purchase fuel for cooking.

**Insufficient health provisions and child protection**

Health provisions are also strained in refugee camps in the Tigray and Afar regions. Even though camps have health centers, they suffer from acute shortages of drug supplies, health care workers, and ambulance.
Facing all these challenges, many Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia look to migrate further abroad.

services. Critical gaps also exist in the provision of mental health services and psychosocial support for traumatized refugees and/or survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking. Many suffer from malnutrition. Very limited supplementary provisions exists for pregnant and breast-feeding women, children, the sick, and the elderly. Kitchen utensils, plastic tarpaulins, fleece blankets, mosquito nets, sanitary materials are also in low supply in the refugee camps. Moreover, interviews with refugees confirm that education services are hampered by a lack of quality education and low enrollment rates, less than 50 per cent at primary and secondary levels. Child protection services, particularly for unaccompanied and separated children, are also poor in the camps: There is limited care, poor case management systems, lack of recreational centers and/or child-friendly spaces, and almost no service for children with special needs, affecting children’s development and vulnerability to exploitation.

**Challenges posed by COVID-19**

These service gaps for Eritrean refugees are further aggravated by new developments, such as changes in asylum procedures, acute shortage of funds and dwindling of resettlement quotas for refugees, and not least the spread of COVID-19. “After the outbreak of COVID-19, donors’ budget support to Agency for Refugees and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) has decreased by 80%,” according to an ARRA officer in Addis Ababa. To reduce physical contact and prevent the spread of COVID-19, Ethiopia and international organizations have limited their services to lifesaving emergencies with other services on hold until the pandemic is

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**Refugees in Ethiopia**

![Map of Refugees in Ethiopia](chart.png)

- **Tigray**: 96,223
- **Afar**: 54,083
- **Gambela**: 333,407
- **Somali**: 199,945
- **Addis Ababa**: 33,325
- **SNNPR**: 4,934
- **Oromia**: 4,037
- **Benishangul-Gumuz**: 66,076

**Country of origin**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source - UNHCR – Last updated 30 Sep 2020
controlled, and restrictions on mobility and service delivery are eased. At the same time, however, limited resources, continuous inflow of refugees, overcrowding, and lack of medical facilities, remain major challenges in the struggle to contain the virus. Moreover, the Ethiopian government recently changed the eligibility process for Eritrean asylum-seekers from prima facie determination to individual determination, which de facto means that refugees may not have access to protection and services. In short, though the situation has become extremely precarious, it has not attracted sufficient attention from the international community and donor agencies.

**To Europe, the Middle East, and South America**

Facing all these challenges, many Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia look to migrate further abroad. Onward movement of refugees in general and Eritrean refugees in particularly is high from Ethiopia. The remoteness and living conditions in the refugee camps in Tigray and Afar have led to the onward movement of approximately 80 per cent of refugees from the camps. The high number reflects the fact that the Eritrean refugee population is significantly comprised of young people and unaccompanied minors.

The refugees face abuse, exploitation, death and disappearance on the journey. Kidnapping for ransom and human trafficking is rampant along the Eritrean, Sudanese, and Ethiopian migratory corridors, and in Libya and the Sahara Desert. Moreover, the war in Libya and the EU externalization of border control measures to Ethiopia and the Sudan – with a view to curtailing refugee movements to Europe – has made the journeys longer, more dangerous, and costlier. Consequently, new and risky migration routes are emerging. As one Eritrean refugee explained in Addis Ababa, this summer, “It’s possible to move to Mexico or Guatemala for $3,500 per person from Uganda. From Mexico you can find a broker who would help you to move to the US.” Though generally aware of the risks, Eritreans are increasingly redirected to secondary destinations following EU interventions, to the Gulf States via the Red Sea and Yemen, to South Africa, and to South America and from there to Mexico and then the US. Ethiopian border authorities estimate that one third of Eritreans transiting through Ethiopia were redirected towards these new destinations. Exact figures, however, are not available given the irregular nature of these new routes. But given the current predicament of Eritreans in Ethiopia this development is likely to persist.

**ETHIOPIA-ERITREA CONFLICT AND EXODUS**

The 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war killed about 100,000 people and displaced many more. Eritrea continue to be one of the largest refugee producing countries in Africa and by 2017 it represented the ninth largest refugee populations in the world. Eritreans have for years been among the top five nationalities entering Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. According to the UNHCR, at the end of 2018, about 600,000 Eritrean refugees were registered worldwide. It is estimated that about 30 per cent of the Eritrean population, which is estimated to be 6 million, live outside the country. By April 2020, an estimated 148,981 Eritrean refugees were registered in Ethiopia, the majority residing in overcrowded camps in Tigray and Afar. This figure does not include unregistered refugees and migrants that informally move to Ethiopian cities and towns.

Cover photo: Eritrean refugee Shewit Hadera looks out of the window in the Adi-Harush Camp in northern Ethiopia (August 2015). Ethiopia hosts nearly 200,000 Eritrean refugees. Photo: Nichole Sobecki/Ritzau Scanpix