

Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 91 - 24 February 2021

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Reported war situation in Tigray (as confirmed per 23 February)

- Human Trafficker and Eritrean national, Kidane Zekarias, who was tried and convicted on serious human trafficking charges in Addis Ababa, has escaped from a federal high court premise. Leading an extensive human trafficking network, and known for cruelty perpetrated on refugees, he was one of the most wanted traffickers. He was arrested in March 2020.
- Lieutenant General Yasser Atta of the Sudan Sovereign Council states to have information “about the presence of Eritrean forces on our borders in Ethiopian military uniform.”
- President and CEO of Save the Children US, Janti Soeripto said, “Since arriving in Axum, Central Tigray in early February, Save the Children has met families who have not eaten for days”.
- She states that Save the Children have reached over 4,300 people with essential supplies and food distributions, but the area is in desperate need of more support.
- Reports of air strikes in Samre and Yechilay areas today by Ethiopian air force.
- Reports of various fires have been detected within neighboring settlements in Saharti, South Eastern of Tigray. The location falls within an active area of fighting.
- Tigray Media House reported that more than 80 civilians have been killed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops at Abi-Adi (near teacher’s college) and villages of Guroro. The troops took IDs of the victims.
- A witness from Mekelle states that the Meles Zenawi Academy was set on fire and he saw clouds of smoke from his house 4km away.
- According to a witness who was an Eritrean refugee in the Shemelba camp in Tigray Eritrean troops entered the camp on 17 November at 14:00 hours. In the previous days, from 15/11 to 17/11 people from the Hitsats refugee camp came to the Shemelba refugee camp.
- The witness says that the Eritrean fighters collected all the young refugees. They took us for a meeting and told us “we control 80% of Tigray. We fight to control Mekelle. Now we control this area.”
- The Eritrean troops that entered Shemelba stated on the 21th of November that “The Government of Eritrea forgives all of you and you can go back to your country.” They also told us not to leave the camp, because we would be shot, killed, says the witness: “anyone who goes outside will be our enemy and you must inform us if someone leaves the camp. Otherwise hard punishment will follow.”
- According to the report, refugees “remained silent” when asked if they would return to Eritrea. The Eritrean soldiers then went from house to house to ask each of the refugees. We told them “We do not want to go, if we are to go then the Red Cross can take us, not the Eritrean Government.” The members of the Shemelba Refugee Committee gave them this message, so they were blamed.
- Then there was a curfew set by the Eritrean soldiers, who were taking things by force from the shops in the camp and moving around in the camp. From the 23rd of November they started to arrest people in the camp. On the 25th of November, the chairman of the Refugee Committee was arrested together with two other members of the committee, including two singers, said the witness.
- The witness says that the chairman of the youth club was arrested; the chairman of the youth club disappeared or escaped. They arrested four women and their children: “We do not know why. In the evening seven children were arrested, and again we did not know why. They disappeared.”

- During this time from 28/11 - 17/12 nine children died. Six persons near zone 1 in Shemelba were killed and 5 refugees who had come from Hitsats were killed and one Tigrayan who was in the camp.
- “The six people that were killed were put in front of us”, says the witness, “They were together in one hole and they shot them from the back of their head. You could not recognise their faces. They had been kicked in their faces.”
- “On 17 December there was fighting between Eritrean troops and the Tigray troops. At that time they were arrested and the situation in the camp was very bad. They kept us for many hours. They killed many animals and also people. We saw corpses on the way on the ground. No one of them had weapons, they were wearing normal clothes. Near Shemelba they threw many bodies.” he states.
- The witness states: “There are fruit gardens and in one of them they threw 23 persons in a well. There were many bodies in the well and the smell was very bad.”
- “On 17 December we were collected, the last group to leave Shemelba” the witness states, “we were more than 300, the last group to be arrested. They took us to Shiraro. We were there until 25 December. Then they took us to Badme, to take us to Eritrea. We were arrested before they told us, we will take you to Eritrea. The guards were very tough.”
- In May Hansi five pregnant women delivered babies between May Kohli and Shiraro and we didn’t know what happened to them, the witness states.
- The witness says that just before they arrived in Badme a shoot out started and in the chaos they were able to escape: “some to the West, some to the South. Even soldiers were running to different places.”
- The group of four that escaped together reached Shiraro, one of them wounded and they went to the Christian church where someone gave them some “small money”, also in the mosque they received some food and then traveled to Shire. The group arrived in Mekelle on 28/12.

Reported international situation (as confirmed per 23 February)

- The EU has urged Ethiopia to end the “blackout” in Tigray.
- The head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Egeland, said that there is still very little access to Tigray. He also said that “We need also to recognize Ethiopia’s been — and is still — extremely generous to refugees. But it doesn’t mean that we have to excuse [it] when we see horrible suffering happening,”
- The NRC had a 100 staff in Tigray when the conflict began but has lost contact with them.
- The EU envoy to the Horn, Finnish foreign minister Haavisto, said that the situation in Tigray is getting “militarily and human rights-wise, humanitarian-wise very out of control,”. He does not see an end to the conflict either.
- Haavisto said that Ethiopia had failed to provide a clear picture of the situation in Tigray, “including the widely documented involvement of forces from neighbouring Eritrea.’ He said “The question of Eritrean troops is extremely sensitive, so we don’t get a clear answer about the whereabouts or magnitude of the Eritrean troops.” He added that Ethiopia is in denial over the gravity of the situation.
- “We are seeing the beginning of one more potentially big refugee crisis in the world,” Haavisto said, “If you don’t influence it now then the circumstances will build so that there are more and more refugees coming.”
- Haavisto found that Sudan is having difficulties coping with the crisis and that a new refugee crisis could be in the making, if the situation is not addressed.

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