



THE AMERICA TEAM FOR DISPLACED ERITREANS

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ERITREAN REFUGEES IN TIGRAY

Presented by John Stauffer and Mike Slotznick of The America Team

Atrocities, regrettably, are all too common in the world. But there are elements of the atrocities in Tigray that are uncommon. There are potential remedies for those atrocities that are equally uncommon. That's what we'll talk about today. And that's the message that we'd like to share: that what we're seeing in Tigray is uncommon, and that we cannot allow it to stand.

Our organization, The America Team for Displaced Eritreans, was established in 2010 to help Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the United States and around the world. In the case of Tigray, we have procured safety (or temporary safety) for many refugees on the ground there; and we have communicated continuously with our own government's officials about what's happening on the ground and what might be done to ameliorate it.

Because Tigray is just over the Eritrean border, it was the first place many refugees would arrive when fleeing the vast human rights depravities in their own country. At many times the refugee flow was intense, with tens of thousands of refugees arriving within short periods. For many years prior to the war, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and a range of international NGOs had supported several camps in Tigray that housed Eritrean refugees. Many of those refugees would then remain in the camps.

They stayed because they couldn't return safely to Eritrea – they would be punished severely for having fled the country; and onward migration was fraught with danger and uncertain livelihood. For many, the refugee camps became their semi-permanent homes.

On the eve of the war in Tigray, nearly 100,000 Eritrean refugees were living in the camps in Tigray.

Eritrean troops entered Ethiopia in early November 2020, assisting the federal government in the vicious assault on the Tigray government and people.

But the Eritrean objective included something else: to get at the refugees who had fled Eritrea over the past twenty years.

Within weeks, Eritrean forces attacked the two northernmost camps – Hitsats and Shimelba. Some refugees there were killed – some by execution – the full number is unknown. Others were reportedly conscripted to immediately join the ranks of Eritrean soldiers at the front. Yet other refugees – reportedly thousands – were abducted or otherwise compelled to return to Eritrea – the very country from which they had fled.

Those abducted were and are at grave risk of being severely punished for having fled their country – being imprisoned, tortured or even killed; that is the way of the Eritrean regime. They were and are also at grave risk of being conscripted into the brutal, slave-like Eritrean military service, and even of being sent back to the front in Tigray as cannon fodder. At the front, they could be ordered to commit the cruel atrocities that have characterized the war. Those abducted will certainly have lost whatever personal freedoms and personal security they had had in the refugee camps prior to the war. Those abducted have been returned to Eritrea’s domain, which, for them, is simply hell on earth.

And other atrocities faced the refugees. Shortly after the war began, UNHCR and international NGO staffs had to flee from the camps for their lives. Eritrean and Ethiopian forces blocked humanitarian access to not only the two northern camps but also to the two southern ones, at Mai Ayni and Adi Harush. Eritrean forces pillaged and obliterated Hitsats and Shimelba camps. Many of the refugees who escaped the destruction, scattered – to Sudan, to towns in Tigray, to Addis Ababa, and elsewhere in Ethiopia. Many who made it to Addis were forcibly returned by the Ethiopian government to the southern camps, only miles from continuing menace by Eritrean forces. Others were abducted at check points as they were moving about in Tigray, and in Addis by Eritrean security agents.

What has become of most of those abducted is unknown. Many who are living elsewhere in Tigray outside of the camps continue to suffer from a woeful insufficiency of food, shelter and medical care. Refugees continue to be abducted to Eritrea.

To be sure, for a time at the Mai Ayni and Adi Harush camps, sporadic attacks by *Tigrayan* militias and individuals occurred. Incidents included harassment, looting, robbery, murder and rape. We are told that many of those attacks were motivated by vengeance against Eritrean

refugees because Eritrean forces were savaging Tigray. But these attacks were apparently not coordinated, strategic or sustained.

My colleague, Mike Slotznick, will now pick up from here with some additional observations.

Thanks, John.

To be clear, the Eritrean refugees haven't suffered the same wholesale atrocities that have been visited upon the Tigrayans. Those atrocities are unspeakable, and they're the subjects of other EEPA webinars in this series.

But I'd like to return now to the theme that John began with, of what's uncommon in this calamity, for Eritrean refugees specifically:

1. The invasion and destruction of UNHCR refugee camps – this is criminal and uncommon in the world's experience.
2. The abduction of refugees and the forcible return of those refugees to the very country from which they had fled – this too is criminal and uncommon.
3. The killing of refugees by soldiers of the country from which they fled. Criminal and uncommon.
4. The complicity in these crimes by the country that's been hosting and securing the refugees, and that's been entrusted by the world to do that. Criminal and uncommon.
5. The blocking of international humanitarian actors from accessing refugee camps for the purpose of saving lives. Criminal and uncommon.
6. Ethiopia abjectly lying to its long-time ally the United States in denying all of those circumstances. Maybe not criminal, but probably uncommon.

Eritrea has now exported to Ethiopia the sorts of atrocities that for decades it has perpetrated within its own borders. International law forbids these crimes.

We believe that the world must now recognize a couple of core facts. First, the current Eritrean regime can never be counted upon to not attempt massive crimes against the Eritrean refugees that remain in Tigray or elsewhere in Ethiopia – even if the Eritrean forces were to withdraw from Tigray temporarily. Second, the current Ethiopian regime can never be counted upon to protect the refugees from the Eritrean forces. To be blunt, there's every reason to believe that the Eritrean government, sooner or later – and quite possibly sooner – could attack, kill and abduct more Eritreans in Ethiopia.

All of that brings us to proposing protective measures that we feel are likely as extraordinary as the crimes that they would seek to prevent. Specifically, we propose enabling all Eritrean refugees, if they wish, to move to safety in other parts of Ethiopia, or even third countries.

We understand that discussions *have* occurred around moving *some* of the refugees to a UNHCR-supported camp Amhara. We also understand that UNHCR is attempting to protect some of the refugees in Addis. Thirdly, we assume that many Eritrean refugees may not want to leave Tigray, where they maintain a remnant of their pre-war social cohesion and share a language and a cultural affinity with their host Tigrayan community. Similarly, some may not wish to leave Addis. But we would emphasize that, in our view, *no* Eritrean refugees are currently safe in Tigray, in Addis, or possibly anywhere in Ethiopia. In particular, we fear that the Ethiopian government's efforts to concentrate the refugees in the southern camps is a recipe for disaster. Hence our extreme proposal.

Thank you all, for attending. Thank you, EEPA, for this forum.

We share our good wishes with all of you who are committed to protecting Eritrean refugees and to advancing the human rights of the Eritrean people.