

Webinar
Voices from Tigray
Crimes Against Refugees Committed in
Tigray
Testimonies
Webinar, 15 June 2021



**VOICES
FROM
TIGRAY**



**15TH
JUNE 2021**

**CRIMES AGAINST
REFUGEES COMMITTED IN
TIGRAY**



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Testimony 1: What happened in Shimelba camp ?

Testimony obtained from a refugee who was living in Shimelba refugee camp

Evidence: testimony of the refugee is audio recorded (name is known to publishers, withheld for security reasons)

I was an Eritrean refugee in the Shimelba camp in Tigray.

Eritrean troops entered our 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 Shimelba refugee camp.

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 Shimelba stated on 21 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:

anyone who goes outside will be our enemy and you must inform us if someone leaves the camp. Otherwise hard punishment will follow.

Refugees remained silent when asked if they would return to Eritrea. The Eritrean soldiers then went from place to place in the camp to ask each of the refugees.

We, refugees, 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 Shimelba Refugee Committee gave them this message, so the refugee committee members 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 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. They were thrown 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.

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. 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.

Just before we arrived in Badme a shoot-out started and in the chaos we were able to escape. Some ran to the West, some ran 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 December 2020.

The testimony was delivered by phone from Addis Abeba.

Testimony 2: Minors as soldiers in the War in Tigray and their presence in the refugee camps

Source: [Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 111 - 25 March 2021](#)

An Eritrean witness states that he saw “many underaged soldiers from Eritrea in Shimelba camp, among the Eritrean troops.” He says: “most of them were from the 33rd Round of Sawa military training camp in Eritrea.”

The 33rd Round is the latest round of National Service that is indefinite, and which takes the highschool students to military training camps, the main one called Sawa. The source says that the soldiers “were between 16 and 20, most of them filed for the matriculation exam.”

Last year PM Abiy visited Sawa camp and participated in the graduation parade training rehearsals of the 33rd Round. Round 33 graduated shortly before the beginning of the war and was sent to Tigray.

Many in the last round are minors and, according to the Eritrean source, the 33rd Round was sent to Shimelba. The National Service has been qualified as crimes against humanity by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea and is associated with forced labour and modern slavery.

The source says that he met one Eritrean minor, who was among the 33rd Round that occupied the Shimelba Refugee camp, where refugees that fled Eritrea were held under international protection.

The source said: “I met with one of them and his name was Nahom, and he was 16 years old. He was a Tigrinya speaker.”

The source further says he witnessed the Eritrean youth sent as military being trained while occupying Shimelba: “We saw some of them taking additional training in Shimelba. This was on 15 Dec 2020 and I was arrested on the top of the mountain with others. We were watching them from the mountain.”

The training of the 33rd round soldiers in Shimelba was a “gunshot training”. The training also included some refugees that were brought over from Hitsats camp who were, reportedly, integrated in the Eritrean forces, deployed in Tigray. This was confirmed with refugees providing interviews in Addis Ababa, who were originally from Hitsats.

Testimony 3: What happened in Hitsats camp

Obtained from a refugee who was in the Hitsats camp when the war in Tigray started

Evidence: written testimony of the refugee in possession of EEPA (names are withheld for security reasons)

By end of November the Eritrean soldiers come to Hitsats to kill police and some soldiers. Then they gathered all people in one place. Some irresponsible people from the camp and from town took properties of the people. Then Eritrean government sent them. After that day in the morning the people with some soldiers came and attack the refugees and killed 9 and injured 17. And fighting continue among Eritrean soldiers and soldiers in the camp and the people fought with the soldiers after that the soldiers fled.

After few days Eritrean soldiers left the camp and soldiers came to control and open fire inside the camp and the refugees start to flee. The soldiers inside the camp don't injure or kill but they told us: "we are coming to make you free". But those who fled were injured by the soldiers and people neighbouring to Hitsats also. Some are unknown where they are and some returned to the camp.

Then the soldiers stayed one month with us.

After that Eritrean troops came and control the camp and told us to leave the camp. After 3 days and nights we reached Sheraro. Most people returned to Eritrea, few come to Addis Ababa and few to May Ayni and Adi Harush camps. The story is like this in short.

Testimony 4: What happened in Adigrat

Obtained from a male refugee who was staying in the town of Adigrat when the war in Tigray started

Evidence: testimony of the refugee is audio recorded (name known to publishers, withheld for security reasons)

Witness: The war started on the 3rd or 4th of November 2020, but the Eritrean soldiers entered Adigrat on 18 November 2020. The previous day there had already been shooting. At those times we were nearby. A lot of people were killed, and a lot of people ran away. The soldiers also attacked a camp for Eritreans, who were protected by the Tigray community. There, under heavy fire, 6 people were killed. We have their names, we were a part of them.

On the Saturday 19th of November 2020 in the morning, the Eritrean soldiers came with about 10 tanks, killing anything on the streets. We were about 5000 people, 300 of which were subjected to shootings. Some of them were killed and some were injured, but I, together with 5 other people ran away from them. One person from our group was hit by a gunshot, while 2 others were caught by Eritrean soldiers. At that time, they collected all Eritreans and Tigrayans, asked them to get their shoes, and then took them to Edaga Hamos. They travelled from Edaga Hamos to Sarha near Zala Ambasa Area on feet, then the Tigrayans and Eritreans were split and the Eritreans were taken back to Eritrea.

We ran to somewhere west of Adigrat, about 20km. We were about 60 Eritreans. The local people helped us, and after 2 weeks we went to Erob Araaroo area. On the 2nd of January 2021 while we were praying in the church, Eritrean soldiers started shooting and hitting a lot of people. People started running away, and we ran with them to the near villages. The Eritrean soldiers started to kill people above 10 years old, and I myself saw 11- and 12-year-old children killed. There, about 37 people were killed, we continued running from the Araaroo area. In that area there was shooting in many places, and I remember that they killed 7 people from one family. Most of us went to Afar Region. My family was there too, my 4 children and my wife among them. While we were escaping, my family was divided into many places. I can't forget what happened at that time, mainly in the church and other places.

At all the places I mentioned, there were only Eritrean soldiers. We know them well, their movements, their military uniform, and the way they talk in Tigrinya. When we returned to Adigrat we found the Federal Ethiopian soldiers there, and the situation became better than when the Eritrean soldiers were present. People started to have some confidence, but the Tigray people started to speak about what happened at the hands of the Eritrean soldiers and started to think about revenge for their people. We, Eritreans, lost our respect with the local people.

Then, I went to Addis Ababa, where I met with my family. My wife was alone with my 4 children, she had run from Hitsats Camp to Addis Ababa. They had suffered a lot together. We were haunted

by all; the Tigray soldiers cannot recognize who is and is not with the Eritrean soldiers. And the Eritrean soldiers were also beating us, and when we ran to the villages, the local people did not trust us at all, even when we told them we were not with the Eritrean soldiers. It was a really hard time for all of us. But even Addis Ababa is not safe for us, because there is a lot of Eritrean Security in this area, and they already have our names. It means we are wanted by the Eritrean Security, so even here we are in a bad situation.

If competent authorities don't take action as soon as possible, the situation will get worse and worse. Before this war, people in Tigray were in a good situation. But now the Tigray and The Eritrean people are all in a bad situation. Immediate action must be taken to get all Eritreans and Tigray people out of this terrible situation. We, the fighters for justice, need protection, because I myself don't know what will happen to me tomorrow. The Eritrean soldiers must leave Tigray. We also need Humanitarian Organizations to come to Tigray to reflect on what is happening, because what we witnessed there, we had never heard about in history. That is why what happened there must be well documented.

What happened left many people here with mental issues, and if they eat breakfast, they can not eat lunch or dinner.

Testimony 5: What happened in Adigrat

Obtained from a female refugee who was staying in the town of Adigrat when the war in Tigray started

Evidence: testimony of the refugee is audio recorded (name known to publishers, withheld for security reasons)

When it started, there was heavy fire in all places, there was also an airplane attack. It was on Friday at 04:00pm and we were in our houses. More and more shooting occurred, and my 4 children and I were forced to leave our house. At that time my husband was outside the home. As we left we were just running forward, and we saw a lot of people falling on the ground. After that, 2 of my children were carried by someone else. He moved to another place because of the heavy shooting. I, with my 2 children, went to a college which had been prepared for the Eritrean refugees. When we reached that place the heavy fire hit the college and killed 5 or 6 people. I saw a car, maybe it belonged to the Tigray Army, I don't know, but I raised my hand to them and they stopped their car. Then they took me to the near village (Boshenka). I was with only 2 of my children, the other 2 were with other people. So, I decided to go back to Adigrat to search for my 2 babies. A woman who let me enter into her home told me not to go there because of the bad situation, but I was only thinking about my children. When I prepared myself to go to Adigrat, I heard that it was already controlled by the Eritrean soldiers, and they were killing everyone on the streets. So, I stayed in that village with the woman, with a bad feeling regarding my 2 children. We found out there was another Eritrean near us, and the people who had carried my children came to me with my 2 babies. My 4 children and I stayed at the house which was given to me by that kind Tigrayan woman. Really, I cannot forget that woman, because although I told her that I'm Eritrean, she let me stay at her home.

We then heard that there were other Eritreans living inside a school, and I met with my husband there. We stayed for about 45 days under the control of the Eritrean soldiers. The situation was so hard and there was not enough food, but there was some cooperation from the local people to us. Many people were killed by the Eritrean or Federal Ethiopian soldiers, but God saved us. After that, I went back to Adigrat to see my small restaurant, but there was nothing there. Everything had been taken. I said to myself; my life is more important than all of this. People who were living near my restaurant told me to leave the place because the Eritrean soldiers had already come to my restaurant and taken everything, also taking photos of the place. There were some Eritreans helping Eritrean soldiers to find Eritreans at the fronts. One woman assisted me and another guy with 500 Birr, and then I traveled to Mekele city where I called someone to collect some money, which he did, and after we traveled to Addis Ababa.

It has been so hard. Not just politically, but also from a humanitarian aspect. If you saw what had happened, I think you would see how dark it is. The Eritrean soldiers killed one guy and told everyone not to bury him. They even said this to the religious people. The body was there until

the Federal Ethiopian army came to the place and gave the permission to bury him. All of this happen to dismiss the peoples of Tigray and Eritrea. And we as Eritrean suffered a lot, because we have no one here, no cousins, no one at all. That is why the situation was so hard and complicated to us. Before the war, we were respected in Tigray, and they respected us wherever we went. This was also obvious during the war in Tigray. The situation is worse for the Eritreans who have not had any kind of help from other people, specifically the Eritrean Refugees in Addis Ababa, because they have no houses, not enough food, lack of money and no one helping them at all.

One day I meet with a boy from my city. He came with the Eritrean soldiers. At first, I was afraid of him, but finally I ran to him and asked him why he came here. Are you here to kill your son? To kill us? Or what brings you here? Then I took him to our home, and he saw my children, they were so afraid. He said to me: "Why are your children in this situation?" Then I told him that I was outside of the city because we were so afraid, and he said: "Why are you afraid? We don't want you and if anyone asked you just tell them that you are Eritrean". I told him that we ran because of the heavy shooting, then I asked him if is is all right that the Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray. He said that the Tigrayan army had planned to invade Eritrea to kill our president Isaias Afwerki, but we attacked them first. I told him that we were living in peace with the Tigrayan people. I told him about everything good in Tigray, but he refused and said the Tigray Government was planning to dismiss us all. He said that actually they did not do as they were ordered because of their humanitarian feeling. They were supposed to kill everyone. I was surprised when I heard him talking like that. The next day he brought me some food, and I told him not to come see me again, because the local people will think that I am a spy and that I am helping you. He also said to me: "Yes if we leave, the local people will kill you all". After I left the city, the owner of the house told me that one of the Eritrean soldiers came to your house.

Please bring peace to the Tigray people, because they did not deserve this at all. And let the Eritrean soldiers leave Tigray, because they are still doing bad things. I just heard from my friend that the Eritrean soldiers came again to their place after the Federal Ethiopian soldiers and she had to run to Mekele again. That is why I wish them peace, the Eritrean Forces must leave Tigray, because they are the only killers there.

Testimony 6. Report from Reuters on killings of humanitarian Workers

“At least 10 aid workers have been killed in the conflict, Lowcock said. They include an employee of the Relief Society of Tigray – a partner of the U.S. Agency for International Development – who was shot dead on April 28th in the central Kola Tembien district. The U.S. Embassy released a statement on May 20th saying Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers had reportedly shot him.” According to eyewitnesses, he clearly identified himself as a humanitarian worker and pleaded for his life before he was killed,” the statement said. Neither the Ethiopian military nor the Eritrean government responded to Reuters’ questions about the killing.”

Testimony 7: What happened in Tigray refugee camps?

Obtained from an officer working in Shire area prior to the outbreak of war

Evidence: Written testimony in possession of EEPA

Hitsats and Shimelba were both raided by Eritrean soldiers. Some of the staff there had already fled the area while some were locked in their room scared. In Shimelba they gathered the refugees and said “Debretsion used to take care of you, where is he now?” no one responded, they just looked down. The refugees were then rounded up and taken to Shashebet, where they were quarantined before being taken to Eritrea.

In Hitsats it was said there were a lot of infiltrators working for the Eritrean government, who were armed and part of the operation. The refugees from this camp went through the same as the ones from Shimelba.

An estimated 60% of the people were said to have escaped and went to the other two refugee camps: May-ayni and Adi -harush. The rest were taken to Eritrea, although some are still escaping and coming back to refugee camps. When asked how they escaped they say: “There is hunger in Eritrea right now and we can’t stand it. The soldiers at the borders just let us pass saying we might starve to death if we stayed there”. The refugees that escaped from Eritrea and came back, were staying in the other two camps, which as a result were overflowing with large numbers of people making it difficult to accommodate everyone.

Now the camps are not the same as before the war. Lots of events unravel daily. A while ago, the refugees were incited to protest, so that Tigray Aid workers could be replaced by Amhara Aid workers. Recently, in Adi Harush they sent back all aid workers, saying that they didn’t need NGOs there.

Recent developments indicate that a lot of the refugees have been travelling to Gondar for Medical and Bank services and are not coming back to the camps. People from the area said that they meet brokers in Gondar and migrate to other countries illegally. This has become a frequent occurrence.

Testimony 8: Abduction of refugees

Source: [Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 124 - 12 April 2021](#)

On the night of the 7th of March 2021, Eritrean troops kidnapped 4 Eritrean refugees from Zone 3 and 4 of Adi Harush refugee camp. On the night of the 8th of March 2021, another 5 refugees were kidnapped. One of them was from the Kunama ethnic group, who was recently relocated from Shimelba camp and was working as a volunteer at the Shimelba hospital. An Eritrean ethnic Kunama, and a father of three, Mr. Adisso, was forcibly taken from his family. His sister tried to fight back, but she was stabbed with a knife around her hand by one of the soldiers. The other 8 refugees were ethnic Tigrinya and had recently been relocated from Hitsats camp. Most refugees feel insecure in the camp, and UNHCR as well as the Agency for Returnees and Refugees Affairs (ARRA) are reluctant to provide protection, especially during at night.

It has been reported that Ethiopia's Agency for Returnees and Refugees Affairs (ARRA) has relocated hundreds of Eritrean refugees who were living inside the school of May Ayni camp to Adi Harish camp. According to sources, most of the relocated refugees were not happy because of the security risk at Adi Harish camp, and the continued kidnapping by Eritrean troops.

Most of the refugees are also afraid that the relocation by the Ethiopian government might be a prearranged plan to get them closer to the border so that kidnapping will be easy for Eritrean troops. Some Eritrean refugees have refused to be relocated and are currently staying near May Ayni camp by renting houses.

Reported on 27 May: MSF has said that it is very concerned at the forcible taking of hundreds of people from camps where internally displaced people are seeking refuge in Shire. MSF teams have seen the ongoing emptying of these camps.

The UN has also said that it is "deeply alarmed" at the rounding up of hundreds of people in Shire. Tewodros Aregai, interim head of Tigray's Northwestern Zone, told AFP Tuesday the arrests were spurred by reports that anti-government forces had infiltrated the camps and that operations were underway to screen refugees. The UNHCR has said that 700 refugees have been swept up by the military.

Source: Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 156 – 27 May 2021

Testimony 9: Starvation

Reported on 20 May: Refugees have told Al-Jazeera that they have not received any food supplies in the two months since they have arrived in Shire. Both refugees and locals are struggling to find any food, sometimes going a week-long, and on occasion longer, without eating anything. The starvation is so bad that some refugees are getting very sick and tired, their bodies not accepting any food anymore. Everyone has lost a lot of weight.

Even in Mekelle, there is a widespread lack of food. One refugee says that she has not eaten anything in four days, and gives everything to her daughter.

Refugees in Mekelle also say how Eritrean soldiers were pillaging and burning crops in April. In one case a refugee said that “They burned my neighbour, an old blind woman together with her crops and house”. Another was forced into the fire after he begged them to leave his crops alone.

Refugees also say that fresh Eritrean troops relieved “those who had been stationed in the area for months.”

A Tigrayan Interim Administration Official told Al-Jazeera that “There is no response. Only in December, 8,000 displaced people in Mekelle received a food ration of 30 kilos. But the number [of people displaced] is growing each day”.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) says that the amount of young unaccompanied refugee children arriving in Addis Ababa is increasing.

According to the UNHCR, there are “1300 unaccompanied and separated children” in Addis Ababa. JRS says that without support, many end up on the streets. It is facing an uphill battle to reunite them with their families or provide them with education.

Source: [Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 151 - 20 May 2021](#)

[Aljazeera: ‘No food for days’: Starvation stalks Tigray as war drags on](#)

Testimony 10: Refugees from the war in Tigray in Kenya

I am receiving calls from Eritreans and Tigrayans who want to flee from Ethiopia because they no longer feel safe. Their relatives in the diaspora also call me for information on how to run and enter Kenya. Most Tigrayans have passports, so some of them fled via planes. At the airport in Addis Ababa, Tigrayans and Eritreans are harassed by security, and many are prevented from leaving even when they hold foreign passports or valid destination visas. Though some stay in Kenya, many continue to Uganda, where they can enter without a permit.

Eritreans and those Tigrayans who do not have legal passports reach Kenya and Uganda with the help of smugglers. But almost all of them, one way or the other way, are held in different detention centres and become victims of smugglers. From Moyale (Kenya) up to Nairobi, refugees are held for an extended period in the detention centres, facing health issues and starvation, until they pay ransoms amounting from US\$1.500 up to US\$2.500.

When asylum seekers make it to Kenya, they do not get registered as asylum seekers due to the closure of the Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) because of COVID. As a result, they are stranded and unable to obtain legal documents; hence, they become more frustrated and confused. In addition to being unable to register as asylum seekers, they can also not access assistance from UNHCR and other relevant organisations which normally provide support services, because of COVID restrictions. Due to a lack of legal documents, when they manage to arrive in Nairobi, they become victims of the smugglers and human traffickers. I am aware of several Eritreans from the refugee camps in Ethiopia and other locations moving to Kenya. Though I know they have left Ethiopia to date, I do not know their whereabouts, and I cannot inform their family members.

At present, I am aware that most Eritreans and Ethiopians in Kenya are imprisoned in Isiolo, Moyale, the Industrial area police station, and in many other detention facilities.

Testimony 11: Testimonies from internally displaced Tegarū , living in Mekelle shelters.

Senait is a 30 year old mother with two children aged 4 years and 9 months. She was displaced with her husband and two children from Hawzen, one of the badly affected cities during the war. She fled as the city was being shelled by heavy artillery; they ran on foot with no direction and no destination in mind. They walked for days, hiding and running from Eritrean and Ethiopians soldiers and finally reached the capital Mekelle. They now live in one of the shelters for the Internally Displaced. Senait suffers from asthma and uses an inhaler and is always worried she might not get medication for long, this is from experience. Recently she couldn't afford to buy medications prescribed for her 4 year old daughter and wonders if that is the fate for her whole family. She was sharing a room with around 70 people. Her main source of worry is not being able to feed her children well, they have regressed in development. When we asked her where her husband is she said that her once respected teacher husband is now roaming the city, begging for food and hoping to find a paying job.

A mother traveled far from Humera to the capital, with her two children. She is just 27 years old and a single mother, she lost her husband before the war. She owned a beauty salon back home and worked hard to make ends meet, she recalls when the war started a lot of unimaginable hostilities occurred in her town by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers but most of all by the Amhara Fano, as they were armed and targeting civilians. They killed and raped women, and displaced residents. Her neighbor was raped by five of the Fano forces and many people were being taken out of their homes and told to go out of the Amhara lands to where they belong, they were told. Some of the people were killed. Rahwa decided she had to save her children and herself, so she fled her home leaving everything she built. She is now always worrying about not being able to feed her kids properly, and provide them with the life they were used to, but the horrific incidents she experienced have left her traumatized. She now says she never wants to go to the place she once called home as it is now filled with memories of horror.

Abreham is a 14 year old young boy who fled his home town of Hawzen with his friend, leaving his parents there as they were separated during the war. He now lives in one of the IDP shelters in Mekelle with his friends, but without a guardian. Not a day goes by without him thinking about his parents, whether they are alive or not and if he will ever get the chance to see them again. He wears the same clothes every day and eats whatever he can find in the shelter, as he dreams about helping his parents on their farm, sleeping in his own bed, having enough food to eat and smelling the fresh breath of freedom.