

## THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HITSATS CAMP CRISIS

April 2020

New refugees from Eritrea are being forcibly returned at the border. Camps are being closed. Hitsats residents are being forcibly moved. Tigrayans run the camps for ARRA and are behind this. Tigray soldiers are threatening refugees in Hitsats.

Part of this is true, much of it is not. But rumors are flying both within the camps and in social media, especially among diaspora Eritreans. Some of this is misinformed or exaggerated, some is intentionally false and designed to sow fear and anger. But who to be angry at? It is true that new arrivals from neighboring countries are no longer automatically offered *prima facie* refugee status once citizenship is confirmed—at least if that neighbor is Eritrea—but the rest is complicated.

This paper is an attempt to sort out the facts, based on firsthand observation and experience and interviews with refugees, officials, aid workers and others with access to hard information. But this is a highly fluid situation and is changing by the week. More real information is needed, as is much more skepticism about the sensationalized charges now on the internet. Panic is dangerous.

This crisis has its origins in a late January summit between Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in Asmara, itself a side session during a three-way on regional relations that included Somali President Mohamed “Farmajo” Abdullah Mohamed. Abiy was growing impatient at the stalled talks on normalization. Isaias told him if he wanted progress, he had to halt the massive influx of Eritreans into Ethiopia.

When Abiy returned to Addis, he had his office phone ARRA Deputy Director General Adisu Kebelessa, a trusted political appointee, who was told to slash the number of incoming refugees. This order was passed directly to ARRA’s regional office in Shire, catching local staff by surprise and triggering a helter-skelter series of moves to stem the flow.

### Where did this come from and why now?

In January there were credible reports that Isaias was tightening security within Eritrea and at the border and was rotating military forces and commanders to ensure loyalty and unsettle TPLF. Isaias had also PNG’d a UNFPA representative in Asmara, which demonstrated his continuing distrust of international agencies. There were also increased *giffas* (forceful round-ups) of national service evaders; one student had been killed in Mendefera while trying to get away.

Meanwhile, there were rumblings of discontent in the middle and upper echelons of the military over the secrecy surrounding Isaias and Abiy’s relations, the continued indefinite terms of national service, the dilapidated condition of the national economy, the high level of unemployment in the civilian sector, and deferred raises for the military. The Yiakl Movement (Enough!) was also still active—not as much as last year due to heightened security but making its presence known and unsettling the authorities. And thousands of Eritreans were fleeing the country to Ethiopia, threatening to undermine the state itself as the outflow steadily sapped the country’s human capital.

Isaias alluded to this in his January interview, though he blamed the international community for drawing people out of the country, charging that this was intended to sabotage his regime, rather than acknowledging the political and economic conditions that were propelling people to go at triple the rate they had been fleeing prior to the July 2018 peace pact. Isaias’s solution: Make it harder and less attractive for them to leave. Abiy was his junior partner in this. ARRA was the instrument.

In early February, Ethiopia withdrew *prima facie* acceptance for Eritrean refugees, creating instant confusion among refugee officials and threatening a social crisis in Tigray as hundreds of unregistered Eritreans crossed anyway and made their way to towns and cities that had no services to accommodate them. This change did not affect applicants from any other neighboring country.

UNHCR had reported the registration of 13,700 over the previous three months (November-January), which was down from the peak in 2018 when borders were opened for the first time, but was a higher monthly average than at any time prior to the peace agreement. This slowed to a trickle after the new policy was imposed.

ARRA staff were told to narrow the criteria for acceptance to Eritreans who could convincingly demonstrate a personal fear of persecution based on political or religious action or association or military position. Categories of exclusion, according to UN sources, included

unaccompanied minors, men of national service age, people seeking medical services unavailable in Eritrea, and those seeking family reunification, which covers three-fourths of the normal intake. Over the first two weeks, the reception center at Endabaguna all but ceased to function, as registration shifted to border posts that had until then been focused on a single task: determining citizenship.

At that point, the official ARRA figures for the total in the four camps was 53,332, which was more or less what it had been for years. This equilibrium reflected the fact that many new arrivals checked into the camps and quickly migrated onward. But ARRA's task now was not just to keep the camps from growing but to shrink them. In furtherance of this, the agency in February initiated a more liberal out-of-camps policy than ever before, for the first time giving permits to refugees without proof of external means of support. More than 5,000 took up the offer within three weeks. But the core of the strategy was to block entry at the border, contravening Ethiopia's laws and its historical practice.

Refugee Proclamation 1110 came into force on 27 February 2019. Article 21, "Declaration of Class of Persons as Refugees," empowers ARRA to declare any group that meets a generous set of criteria to be recognized as refugees. Up to this year, all Eritreans who requested protection had been automatically given refugee status, so long as they could demonstrate Eritrean citizenship. This was also true for South Sudanese, Somalis and Sudanese who requested protection—and still is—though it did not hold true for asylum seekers from states that do not border on Ethiopia, e.g., Nigerians or Congolese, who have to meet stricter requirements.

Paragraph 4 of this law spells out how and when such status can be removed: "The Agency shall issue a Directive terminating the group refugee recognition procedure when determining, giving due consideration to country of origin information and in consultation with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, that circumstances which led to the group refugee status recognition has ceased to exist" [[www.refworld.org/docid/44e04ed14.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/44e04ed14.html)].

But no such determination was made about Eritrea and there was no consultation with UNHCR on the withdrawal of group protection. Nor was ARRA given any advance notice that such a decision was even under consideration, and no preparation was done on the ground to either inform the refugees in advance or to get staff and facilities ready by, for example, hiring and training ARRA staff to make determinations on status based on the new, much more narrow criteria to be used; setting up proper reception centers at the border staffed by both ARRA and UNHCR interviewers; publicizing the decision so that would-be asylum seekers who risked their lives and livelihoods to get to the border would not arrive to learn that they were no longer welcome and face the prospect of arrest or worse if they tried to go back. And that is just the administrative end.

This new policy reversed decades of policy under which Ethiopia offered safe haven to anyone coming from a neighboring state. In singling out Eritreans for ultra-strict screening to prove fear of persecution and putting into effect such broad categories of exclusion, Abiy opened the door to altering Ethiopia's identity as a welcoming state and placed him in the company of extremists like Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel who categorizes all African asylum seekers as "infiltrators", or anti-immigrant European autocrats like Hungary's Viktor Orbán who simply locks them out in a brazen effort to keep the culture (i.e., the race) pure.

### **What about the actual implementation of this strategy?**

ARRA's regional director was told to manage it. He came to Hitsats and told residents the camp was to be closed, and they would have to move to either Mai Aini or the Adi Harush camp. When refugees protested, he left. The next thing they knew, ARRA and UNHCR closed their offices and relocated their staffs. Residents got a month's ration but that was it. Services and protection ended. They were on their own.

There was apparently a notice that buses would be provided but refugees would only be permitted to take a single bag. Other personal belongings would either be left behind; they wanted them, they would need to arrange transport themselves. It was a cruel and entirely unexpected turn of events.

Many blamed the messenger, a Tigrayan. Some saw it as a Tigrayan conspiracy. It was not.

The regional director is a Tigrayan long known for his strong sympathy for the refugees and for his work on their behalf, but most of his staff are from other regions of Ethiopia—all, including the regional director, are civil servants working for a national agency that manages camps throughout

the country and serves some 900,000 refugees. Some do their jobs with personal dedication, others do not, as is true of all government departments. The claim by some that ARRA is controlled by the TPLF and the State of Tigray is false. It may have been dominated by TPLF appointees prior to 2018 (only a minority of whom were Tigrayans even then), but the leadership has gone through a major shift under Abiy's direction. The director in Addis is an Amhara, the deputy an Oromo, and staff through the ranks are now—as they have been for years—from all over Ethiopia. The false narrative that TPLF is behind the changed policy has the potential to stir up serious trouble and turn the diaspora into a force for supporting Isaias's efforts to crush TPLF, which is just what he wants.

Nor is ARRA a free-standing, autonomous body. For years, the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs was a department of Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). In October 2018, it was renamed an Agency (keeping the same initials as before) and placed under the newly formed Ministry of Peace, alongside the NISS and other departments and police and security forces. But it remains a branch of the Federal government and answers to the PM's office.

So when ARRA's regional director came to Hitsats to announce the plan to close the camp, he was acting at the behest of Addis. Blaming him for the decision, as some have done, distracts from the real forces behind this. In fact, the Tigray state has put people in several of the former ARRA reception centers along the border and has been processing new arrivals in contravention to orders from Addis. Refugees have already been flocking to Tigrayan cities and towns, renting property, putting their children in Tigray schools, even starting small businesses—all with tacit support of the regional government. Tigray officials have recently visited Hitsats to tell residents they do not need to move, if they wish to stay, though they will not have the rations and services they had before because the former providers are now absent, not just the UN but the NGOs that ran special training programs and services.

Today, the forced move to other camps is on pause due to the COVID-19 crisis, but it will come up again once the pandemic lets up. At that point, the refugees will need Tigray as an ally against pressure from Addis to get them to leave.

Meanwhile they have lost federal protection. That was evident when members of an armed Eritrean opposition group came to Hitsats to allegedly coerce refugees into joining them. One version making the rounds has Tigrayan military working with them. On its face, this is an outlandish claim but it demands further scrutiny. Who is making these inflammatory charges? On what basis? That Tigrayan may have been present is possible, but if so, who were they and what role did they play? Did they represent the Tigray state (or TPLF)? Was this simply a recruitment effort or did the intruders threaten or coerce the refugees?

The implication of the rumors is that Tigrayans who were escorting the Eritreans were soldiers but informed sources in the camps dispute this, as do Tigray officials. What should happen now is that Tigray officials investigate the incident and clamp down hard on those responsible if the charges are proven accurate.

Some refugees blame the aid agencies for not intervening, but this, too, is way off-base. Humanitarian agencies can never intervene in situations like this, nor can UNHCR. What people can demand is that aid agencies with direct experience of such situations speak out about them, as a small handful did in the 1980s Ethiopia famine, for example. But that is different. They should not be made scapegoats for Ethiopian policy decisions.

Ethiopia has a legal, if not a moral, right to move the refugees. They did this 15 years ago with the Kunama camp and they have moved others at various times. But forcing people to leave suddenly, without allowing them to take their personal belongings is a travesty. This ought to be postponed until the pandemic is passed, and it should be slowed down so it can be done safely, systematically and fairly. Provisions and preparations for such a move need to be done ahead of time—for transport, housing, orientation, rations, and so on.

But to be clear—the responsibility for this lies with the Abiy government. And the force behind this is Isaias. ARRA is only the implementer. UNHCR and the NGOs can be castigated for their silence in the face of both the deprivations and the risks the refugees face. UNHCR has a duty to protect insofar as monitoring and advocating but not at the ground level in terms of policing. Get after them for what they are mandated to do, not what you think they ought to be responsible for. That would demand changes at an international level—next to impossible in the present climate. Meanwhile, to argue this distracts from the issues at hand and undermines an effective campaign for change.

