

Eritrean refugees: Still caught in a game of “political football”

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Newly arrived Eritrean immigrants wait to be registered as refugees at the Endabaguna reception and registration centre for the newly arrived Eritrean refugees in Shire town, near Eritrean boarder, Tigray region, Ethiopia, November 9, 2017. REUTERS/Tiksa Negeri

Ethiopia is planning to shut a camp and is refusing prima facie acceptance of Eritrean refugees ensnared in toxic rivalries between Addis Ababa, Tigray, and Asmara.

A year ago, Tigrayan minibus drivers gave discounted rates to **newly arrived Eritrean refugees** who travelled to the town of Shire, especially if they were attractive young women. There was flirting and jokes in a packed minibus with loud Tigrinya music in the background and white netela scarves frantically danced in the wind when the driver sped up to impress the girls.

It seemed like a school trip. Nobody could have guessed that **the young people on the bus had fled Eritrea**. The driver’s brother said in a wide hypodontia smile, “These are our Tigrinya brothers and sisters: we are happy to welcome them.”

“Darker reality”:

A darker reality lay not far beneath, namely **views of an independent state of Tigray**, incorporating at least a part of Eritrea.

During the bus ride between Hitstas and the nearest town, Shire in the Ethiopian province of Tigray, which borders Eritrea, was being buoyed up with nostalgia and nationalism about the **Axumite Kingdom**, which many centuries earlier had lost control of Red Sea trade to an Arab caliphate. And last century, Ethiopia lost access to the Port of Assab, as Eritrea became independent.

Some of the Tigrayan passengers who did not hope for the province's secession from Ethiopia, or who did not support the (fringe) Agazian movement that called for the establishment of a Tigrinya-speaking Orthodox Christian state, were at least **hostile to Abiy Ahmed**, then in power for a year as the new chairman of Ethiopia's ruling coalition and, by extension, as prime minister.

They saw him as a **CIA agent on steroids**, pulling public relations stunts that fooled naïve foreigners.

On the minibus, nobody knew Abiy's policies but they were **quick to comment on his Oromo ethnicity and religious beliefs**, and his apparent hatred for the people of Tigray, whose governing party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had dominated Ethiopia's ruling system for a quarter century. The TPLF's leaders had **fought a war with Eritrea** in the 1990s.

Peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia:

Last August, Hitsats, the newest of four refugee camps, **accommodated 34,000 Eritreans**, and was full of artists: musicians playing a traditional guayla on a type of lyra called krar, as well as poets and actors performing hikeyya, a form of political satire.

Eritrean refugees who had the money took the one hour ride to Shire and other towns in Tigray. They said they left Eritrea because **nothing had improved after the peace agreement between Abiy and Eritrea's President Issayas Afeworki** in 2018, for which Abiy alone would soon go on to be fêted with a Nobel Prize.

In September 2018, the countries **briefly opened their border** until Eritrea closed it again, ostensibly because of unregulated cross-border trade. (Eritrean households used Nakfa to buy goods from Ethiopian merchants, who, having no use for the Nakfa they accumulated, bought goods in Asmara to take back to Ethiopia as well as secretly hoarded foreign currency from Eritrean households.)

Eritrean refugee flow increases:

The moment the borders were opened, the refugee flow **increased almost five-fold** to an average of 390 daily, with 27,000 arriving at entry points to Ethiopia, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR).

In Hitsats, small, one room shelters of 4×5 metres were overcrowded, sometimes with as many as twenty young people of both sexes **living in cramped conditions**, and five persons having to share one, self-made mud bed. **After the mass exodus followed by the open borders**, there were no more shelters left to accommodate the newly arrived refugees.

The agencies started constructing '**transitional shelters**' from CGI sheets. In the hottest months of April and May, they were as scolding as a *mogogo*, an oven used to make *injera*, a traditional flatbread. During the rainy season, the rain was so loud from inside the shelters that it was almost impossible to hear what the person sitting beside was saying.

Closing the doors:

Two years after the rapprochement, **the Nobel laureate's policies seem darker and muddier**. After Abiy last walked the red carpet in Asmara to meet with Issayas in January 2020, the **Ethiopian**

federal government's Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) has moved rapidly on plans to shutter Hitsats.

One senior retired Tigrayan intelligence official told us that Issayas had **instructed Abiy to do as much**. (Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel didn't respond to a request for comment.)

Since February, residents are being told that **they will be moved to two older and overcrowded camps**: May-Ayni and Adi-Harush, after an initial delay stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hitsats, paradoxically, was established exactly seven years ago, **precisely to deal with the lack of capacity of the three other camps** in Tigray accommodating Eritrean refugees. There are now about 12,000 refugees in Hitsats and ARRA is refusing to accept Eritrean refugees on the prima facie basis on which they have always been accepted.

Fleeing Eritrea:

Among those who travelled across the border in the months it was open in 2018 include the family of a mother, sister (both had been imprisoned in Eritrea), and niece (was raped in Eritrea) of Mesfin (not his real name), a resident of Hitsats. Mesfin had arrived before them in 2015 after forking over an equivalent of **\$2,500 in Nakfa to smugglers**.

Fifteen years ago, Mesfin had joined a theological college in Asmara, vowing to become a Catholic priest. But he decided to flee after what he described as an **over six-years' cycle of intermittent imprisonment** that followed his initial refusal to be conscripted into open-ended national service. Finally, he was forced to work at a state enterprise.

As Mesfin crossed over, he recalled Eritrean soldiers firing at those who fled. First, Ethiopian soldiers gave him food and water; then he was sent to Sheraro, a frontline refugee reception centre; and a day later, he was sent to Endabaguna, an official reception centre of ARRA, where he was debriefed for three days.

Eventually, UNCHR promised that he would be resettled in America, but it remains a distant dream.

Eritrean refugees: "political football":

Frontline reception centres at the Tigray-Eritrea border, once 16, are now three, even though Eritreans continue to cross the border, **which remains porous**. The Hitsats refugee committee has written to UNHCR fearing revocation of their refugee status and deportation back to Eritrea.

In March, the organisation wrote back that it had not received an official written notification about **the planned camp closure**, but all refugee camps in Ethiopia are run by ARRA and UNHCR is merely an implementing partner that needs to tread carefully.

For years, Eritrean refugees have served as something of a political football used to advance Ethiopia's national security objectives; and so it is again. "This is your home; this is your country," the TPLF's chairman, Debretsion Gebremichael, declared in February, "To the Eritrean army, this is your country!"

Eritrean dissident organisations in Tigray want to absorb residents of Hitsats whom they say ARRA will not help; and Tigray doesn't want to shut its doors to Eritrean refugees as rivalries deepen with

the governments of Abiy and Issayas, who seem to want nothing less than the TPLF's leaders' heads on a platter.

Deteriorating conditions at the camp:

Abraham, another refugee (not his real name), **gained prima facie status at Hitsats a month before the peace agreement.** Since then, conditions have deteriorated, food rations have dropped from 10 to 7 kilograms, wheat was replaced with maize, and water and medication are less available than before, he says. As the camp is not fenced, he is fearful, given anyone can enter, especially at night.

To make matters worse, one of the agencies working in the camp is **threatening and imprisoning refugees opposing closure.** Violence escalated during Orthodox Easter celebrations in April when police were called in but did not carry out any arrests. Although Hitsats is considered **safe during the day**, it is **perceived as dangerous at night.**

There is **no electricity grid**, and the dominant demographic, young men between 16 and 25 are seen as a threat and are blamed for night-time disturbances. Some refugees suspect that ARRA may wish to **incite violence in the camp** in order to have a pretext to close it down or that Eritrean pro-government spies living there are reporting to Asmara.

Rapprochement at a dead-end

In the wake of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War, the neighbours sheltered and armed each other's dissidents, but the rapprochement has seen **Issayas export Ethiopian rebels back home while Abiy put an end to operational support and subsidies** from Ethiopia's federal government to anti-Issayas Eritrean exile organisations.

When Debretsion spoke, Issayas Woldegiorgis, an ex-deputy head of Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Service under TPLF rule, was **seeking out active military defectors** before they were able to enter Endabaguna (the entry point into the federal refugee bureaucracy), according to an Eritrean source in Tigray (he was informed of this by refugees who had been contacted by Woldegiorgis).

The Eritrean President's position was already clear as he accused Tigray's rulers of **"hiring spies and collaborators"** in order to create "opposition" and a surge in "acts of establishing "refugee camps" in collusion with UNCHR "to attain carefully-woven schemes of draining Eritrean manpower." "We will stay the course until this process, which is still at its incipient stage, is consummated," Issayas said of his still little understood dealings with Abiy.