

ERITREA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO ETHIOPIA IN MAY 2019



20.11.2019

Fact-finding Mission Report

Country Information Service

Introduction

This report has been prepared as part of the FAKTA project, which has received funding from the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).¹ Researchers of the Finnish Immigration Service's Country Information Service conducted a fact-finding mission regarding Eritrea to Ethiopia in May 2019. The purpose of the fact-finding mission was to gather information on the effects of the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the situation at the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Another objective of the mission was to create a contact network with international and national operators.

During the fact-finding mission, the researchers visited the Tigray Region near the border with Eritrea, and the capital city of Addis Ababa. The researchers interviewed international organisations and Ethiopian operators as well as Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who had arrived in Ethiopia. The parties interviewed for this report did not want their names revealed in the report, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Some of the interviewees wished to remain completely anonymous.

¹ Development Project for fact-finding mission practices on country of origin information 2017–2020.

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Information on the report

The report by the Finnish Immigration Service's Country Information Service is based on the European Union's quality guidelines for analysing country information as well as guidelines for fact-finding missions. The report is based on carefully selected sources. The report makes use of the interviews conducted during the fact-finding mission and, where necessary, it has been supplemented with written source material. The amount of the source material use is limited, and the report is not exhaustive. To obtain an exhaustive picture about the matter at hand, report should not be used in decision-making alone but supplemented with other sources. The absence of an event, person or organisation from the report does not imply that it never occurred or that the person or organisation did not exist. The report is based on independent research and analysis by the Country Information Service. The Country Information Service is responsible for the contents of the report. The perspectives and statements presented in the report do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Finnish Immigration Service, nor should the report be regarded as a legal or political statement.

1 The effects of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Eritrea

1.1 The impacts of the peace agreement on the internal situation in Eritrea

Several sources who were interviewed noted that Eritrea has not carried out reforms inside the country since the signing of the peace agreement² between Eritrea and Ethiopia.³ According to an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) operating in Ethiopia, the peace agreement is a high-level political treaty between two countries and has nothing to do with the internal situation of Eritrea. Although relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have improved, the situation inside Eritrea has remained unchanged. The organisation is unaware of any changes or reforms implemented by the Eritrean government inside Eritrea.⁴ According to an anonymous source, the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia is part of foreign policy and unrelated to domestic policy. The peace process between the countries has not caused changes in the internal affairs of Eritrea, only Eritrea's relationship with Ethiopia has changed.⁵

1.1.1 Reforms concerning the educational sector

In the view of the international organisation, Eritrea has not carried out reforms inside the country since the signing of the peace agreement. According to the organisation, reforms were started in the educational sector in Eritrea in August 2018, but they have been mostly negative by nature. Said reforms or possibly some other reasons have caused several hundred students to lose their place of study at least at a few different colleges in Eritrea. According to information received by the organisation, 147 students lost their place of study in Adi Keyh. In the former *Eritrea Institute of Technology*, which currently provides teaching only in engineering and the natural sciences, more than half of the students have lost their place of study. *The Smap Institute of Training, Education, Research and Consultancy*, the only educational institution resembling a private school in Eritrea, was completely closed down at short notice. The Institute did not have full-time students.⁶

The international organisation does not have ascertained information about the specific reasons why the places of study have been terminated. For some reason, the aforementioned educational institutions did not want to keep the students enrolled anymore. The organisation says that estimates of what has happened to the people who lost their place of study are varied. Some estimations suggest that there are young people in the capital city of Asmara with nothing to do, no place of study or education. However, the organisation finds it unlikely that this would be an undesirable situation for the Eritrean government. The organisation finds it more probable that people who have lost their place of study have been recruited either into the military or back to National Service.⁷

² Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship in July 2018. (UN HRC 16.5.2019).

³ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019; International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁵ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

1.1.2 Effects on the markets in Eritrea

One concrete change that has taken place since the signing of the peace agreement is the opening of the Ethiopian market for Eritreans, as a result of the opening of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia (see 2.1.).⁸ Road traffic was opened for commercial traffic,⁹ and Ethiopian merchants and lorries arrived in Eritrea.¹⁰ Ethiopian vehicles and merchants moved around in Asmara, and news from the other side of the border were reported and exchanged amidst trading.¹¹ Also, many Eritreans crossed over to the Ethiopian side to buy products and took them back to Eritrea to be sold.¹² Consumer goods and building supplies that were unavailable before were put up for sale in Eritrea. At the same time, prices in Eritrea declined. This trading by Ethiopians caused harm to Eritrean small-scale merchants and entrepreneurs who lost customers. According to the international organisation, since the closing of border crossing points between Eritrea and Ethiopia (see 2.1.2.), the situation in Eritrea has been restored and prices have increased back to their old levels. The organisation says that in late April 2019 Eritrea was again in the same situation as before the peace agreement.¹³

1.1.3 Checkpoints on roads

According to the international organisation, the number of checkpoints on roads has increased since border crossing points between Eritrea and Ethiopia were opened (see 2.1.). Ethiopian vehicles arrived in Eritrea, so guards began to inspect vehicles at several checkpoints. Since the border was opened, unlawful weapons, drugs and medicine have been brought into Eritrea in vehicles. At checkpoints vehicles are inspected for any contraband. The organisation says that not all vehicles are inspected at checkpoints: only some of them actually undergo an inspection. According to information received by the organisation, the inspections are apparently made at random.¹⁴

The same organisation says that, for instance, the road leading from Asmara to Massawa has more checkpoints than before at locations where none used to exist. The road in question also has variable checkpoints, the organisation reports. The number of checkpoints on the road from Keren leading to Gash-Barka has also risen significantly.¹⁵

The international organisation is uncertain whether Eritrean students are issued *holiday passes* in the same way as before, or if they can use the pass to move inside Eritrea like before. The organisation says that a *holiday pass*, granted for holiday periods, is a practice that is in place for students. Students can move at variable checkpoints by showing the *holiday pass*. Issuing passes is an attempt to ensure that there are not too many like-minded people in the same place during holidays, thereby creating some kind of popular movement, for example.¹⁶

⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁹ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

¹⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹¹ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹² International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹³ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁴ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

1.1.4 Outlook for the future

The organisations interviewed are unaware of any potential reforms or changes in Eritrea.¹⁷ An international NGO operating in Ethiopia does not believe that the peace agreement will bring with it any changes within Eritrea.¹⁸ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia also does not see any amendments to the procedures of Eritrean authorities in the present or in the future.¹⁹ One international organisation says that, the peace agreement notwithstanding, there are no reforms in sight related to legislation, the Constitution, the economy or the development of rule of law in Eritrea. According to the organisation, Eritrea's current government typically does not provide advance information about any upcoming reforms. However, the organisation does not believe that Eritrea can expect any changes in the short term.²⁰

1.2 The impacts of the peace agreement on National Service

1.2.1 Duration of National Service

Several sources that were interviewed say that no amendments have occurred in the duration or content of the National Service in Eritrea since the signing of the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia.²¹ According to the international organisation, people in Eritrea have expected the President of the country to announce a restriction on the duration of the national service.²² Still, no official announcement has been made in Eritrea of any changes to the National Service.²³ There are many rumours about restrictions on the duration of the National Service. The international organisation mentions hearing reports that the President of Eritrea, in his 2018 Sawa speech,²⁴ said that those who entered the service at that time would only serve for a limited time. Rumours²⁵ have suggested that

¹⁷ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁰ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²¹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

²² International organisation 29.4.2019.

²³ Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁴ Every year, the President of Eritrea addresses students who are graduating from Sawa and who enter the National Service after graduation. (Madote / Kidane 2016.)

²⁵ According to a news report published by Reuters on 23 July 2018, the latest group of people recruited into the National Service were told that their time of service would not exceed 18 months. This information comes from family members of recruits who took part in the graduation ceremony of people entering the service, which was held on 13 July 2018 and also attended by the President of Eritrea. According to the family members, it was announced during the ceremony that the National Service of new recruits would not last for more than 18 months. The Minister of Transport and Communications in Eritrea did not dispute this information, but said that no official release has been issued on the subject. According to the Minister, the Eritrean government communicates such significant policies, without exception, through official channels, and this has not taken place. (Reuters 23.7.2019.)

the time of service would be 18 months. The organisation says it has not been confirmed that those who entered the service in July 2018 would not serve for more than 18 months. According to the organisation, there has been discussion of limiting the duration of the national service in Eritrea before, but this has not come to pass.²⁶

1.2.2 Remuneration and duty to report

The international organisation is unaware of any changes in remuneration of people doing their National Service. According to the organisation, the pay received from the national service is not enough to live on in Eritrea. This is why many of those doing their National Service also do other work. In the afternoon, recruits leave their place of service and go to work somewhere else. Still, even Eritreans who hold three separate jobs have difficulty making a living.²⁷

According to the international organisation, the duty to report for National Service has become stricter and more heavily controlled. Individuals doing their National Service must register as being present on a daily basis. The organisation says that those who do their service at government agencies must report their presence in the morning and in the evening. In April 2019 the organisation learned that the duty to report of government employees was increased to four times a day. According to the organisation, employees must prove their presence four times a day because there are not enough people left in the National Service.²⁸

According to an account by three educated Eritrean males who crossed the border into Ethiopia in May 2019, presence was expected while they performed their National Service in offices. Throughout their service, they had to register four times a day, i.e. twice in the morning and twice in the evening. The men said that their pay, which was inadequate to begin with, would be reduced if they were absent from service for even one day. According to the men, they were unable to choose their education in Eritrea and ended up in their occupations against their will. The men were ordered to perform duties that did not match their education.²⁹

1.2.3 Re-recruitment to National Service

According to information reported to the international organisation, youngsters previously released from National Service and perhaps other people also were recruited back into the National Service. The organisation emphasises that it does not have first-hand knowledge of the matter, but it is aware of Eritreans who have been called back into national service they had already completed. The organisation presumes that a *certificate of completion* on the national service is not that strong document, after all. At least young men have been called back into service before, but now even young women have been called back, as well. The organisation is unaware whether married women or mothers have been summoned back to National Service. The organisation does not have precise information of people who are subjected to re-recruitment, but young people of service age are gladly admitted back to service.³⁰

²⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁸ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁹ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

³⁰ International organisation 29.4.2019.

Some Eritreans have decided to leave the country after they have received a summons to re-enter National Service they already completed.³¹ One Eritrean male interviewee who crossed the border to Ethiopia in May 2019 said that he left Eritrea after he was summoned to National Service again. The man had previously been a soldier in the military, and had worked as a driver for two years after his release before the new summons.³² An Eritrean female interviewee, who crossed the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia when it was open, said that she had been called back to National Service a few years earlier. According to her account, she entered the service on the 26th recruitment round³³ and completed her service, but she was summoned back into service. After that, she tried to leave the country but was apprehended and spent several months at various detention centres under arrest. From there, she was ordered to re-enter the military where she served for three years before she escaped.³⁴

According to the international organisation, a large military exercise was organised in Mendefera in April 2019. The organisation says that many people left the country before that because it would have meant entry into National Service and the army for them.³⁵

1.2.4 Release from National Service

According to the international organisation, no large-scale releases from National Service have occurred in Eritrea since the signing of the peace agreement. The organisation is not certain how people are released, because some individuals are released from National Service on a continuous basis. In the organisation's view, there is no difference in the number of people released from National Service compared with previous figures. There was a lot of talk about demobilisation in Eritrea immediately after the conclusion of the peace agreement, but it was not clear whom or which groups this would possibly apply to. According to the international organisation, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), which is not an independent operator but linked to the Eritrean government, has referred to demobilisation twice in speeches. However, the source is not aware of any potential future releases.³⁶

According to the international organisation, there is not enough labour in many sectors in Eritrea, so large-scale releases from National Service are impossible. All able-bodied citizens are put to work in Eritrea. The organisation says it is difficult to believe that individuals in the teaching sector, for instance, could be released from National Service even if they have served for a long time, since there are not enough graduates for the teaching profession. According to the organisation, service times in National Service have been random and are not even dependent on the groups of professionals that are needed.³⁷

According to an account by an Eritrean female who crossed the border into Ethiopia in spring 2019, she was supposed to be demobilised after eight years in National Service, but this did not occur. Documents related to demobilisation were hidden from her, and she did

³¹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

³² Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

³³ Young people recruited on the 26th round graduated from Sawa and entered National Service in the summer of 2013. (EASO 2015, pp. 34–35.)

³⁴ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

³⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

³⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

³⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

not receive a response when she asked to see the documents. Ultimately, she escaped from National Service after being allowed to go home on leave.³⁸

1.2.5 People's Army

According to the international organisation, Eritrea has a fairly large militia³⁹ consisting of citizens of the country. The organisation says that an enormous number of weapons was suddenly taken away from homes in Eritrea after the signing of the peace agreement. Fairly soon after that, in autumn 2018, the organisation learned that the militia had been re-armed and, in the same context, weapons were distributed back to homes. The organisation believes that disarming the militia would have left a vacuum in Eritrea's security machinery, so the weapons were given back to former owners.⁴⁰

1.2.6 Future National Service

An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia says that there are no plans to make changes to National Service in Eritrea.⁴¹ Another international organisation also believes that Eritrea's National Service will remain unchanged in the future. The organisation says it is difficult to believe that the State of Eritrea would be able to function at present without a system like the National Service. The organisation believes that, without National Service, Eritrea would be unable to implement road projects or building projects on railways and in ports or obtain enough workforce for these. In the organisation's assessment, National Service can be used as a means to acquire more workers for upcoming road and infrastructure projects in Eritrea.⁴²

1.3 The impacts of the peace agreement on the human rights situation in Eritrea

According to organisations that were interviewed, the situation of human rights in Eritrea has not improved after the signing of the peace agreement with Ethiopia.⁴³ A human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia says that Eritrea's situation with human rights has remained unchanged despite the peace agreement.⁴⁴ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is also unaware of any changes in the human rights situation in Eritrea.⁴⁵ One international organisation says that there has been no change for the better in human

³⁸ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

³⁹ People's Army (*Hizbawi Serawit*) consists of citizens who have been released from national service or who complete the service in civilian duties. (UN HRC 5.6.2015, p. 77.) Civilian members of the militia must accept a uniform and weapon provided by the government and take part in armed training. (EASO 2015, pp. 43–44.)

⁴⁰ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴² International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴³ Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴⁴ Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴⁵ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

rights in Eritrea. According to the organisation, the situation with human rights has deteriorated in comparison with the time before the peace agreement.⁴⁶

1.3.1 Arbitrary detention

According to an international organisation, instances of arbitrary detention increased in Eritrea in April 2019. The organisation says that people are detained in Eritrea on random grounds.⁴⁷ Grounds for detention can be, e.g., political opinions or religious reasons, but viewing people as enemies of the State, completely at random, has also become more frequent in Eritrea.⁴⁸ An increasing number of people go missing in the country. According to the organisation, the large scale of disappearances is manifested by the fact that in Asmara, people already say an evening prayer as thanks for making it through the day, as some people vanish during the workday.⁴⁹

The same organisation says that random detention occurs in Eritrea in waves. According to the organisation, the situation in Eritrea was similar in April 2019 as in May 2018, when many people were arrested and anyone could be targeted. In May 2018, even individuals who worked for foreign embassies or dealt with foreigners were detained. This happened despite the fact that the disappearance of people who interact with foreigners becomes public knowledge.⁵⁰

According to the international organisation, underground prisons in Eritrea are fuller than ever before. The official police service is unwilling to provide information about detainees, and enquiring about missing family members can place the person asking the question at risk. According to the organisation, some people who went missing in May 2018 have been heard about after their disappearance. One missing person returned after two months but has not uttered a word about it. The organisation believes that the individual may have been compelled to remain silent about what happened during detention.⁵¹

1.3.2 Religious groups

In late April 2019, an international organisation estimated that persecution of religious groups has increased in Eritrea.⁵² According to the organisation, religious persecution became more profound during the summer of 2019. As part of nationalisation measures underway in Eritrea, some property of the Catholic church has been seized by the government, along with clinics maintained by Catholics that were closed down and the health services they provided were terminated. At least 23 Catholic clinics have been seized according to the organisation, which says that the underlying factor is a law according to which service in Eritrea can only be provided by the government. The events began in June 2019, and the situation became worse in July 2019. At first, the organisation only learned of incidents in the Keren region, but since then more reports have come in of seizures of Catholics' property in Eritrea. Previously, clinics maintained by Protestants were also seized by the government, but their services were allowed to continue. The organisation says that the incidents are a continuation of events in

⁴⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴⁸ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁴⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁵⁰ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁵¹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁵² International organisation 29.4.2019.

autumn 2017 when staff members of an Islamic school were arrested⁵³ in Asmara. However, the religious persecution in summer 2019 was not directed at Muslims, the organisation says.⁵⁴

The international organisation believes that the situation of religious minorities in Eritrea is serious.⁵⁵ The organisation says that Christians, who are members of free churches, are one typically persecuted group in Eritrea. Christian revivalist movements are in the worst position of all.⁵⁶ According to the organisation, a particularly large number of people have been arrested on religious grounds. Arrests of members of unregistered Christian churches have increased, and even Orthodox priests have been detained. According to observations made by the organisation, the government used to justify arrests by saying that some elements of religion are contrary to the government of Eritrea, but now people are detained merely due to religion. Previously, pregnant women were spared from arrests but these days they can also be detained. Family members have been unable to meet with detainees. The organisation says that arrests have taken place in waves and have not ceased, even if the situation has calmed down momentarily. According to the organisation, leaders of underground churches have urged people to be on high alert.⁵⁷

Eritrea is a religious society, and religion is a visible part of everyday life. Church leaders are politicized, because the Eritrean government appoints the heads of churches and expects members of management to look favourably on the government. The international organisation says that Eritreans are aware that they cannot choose their religion or faith freely: instead, religion must be practised as permitted by the State. According to the organisation, individuals who are religious in a way that differs from the norm within Eritrea's permissible denominations⁵⁸ may be silenced.⁵⁹

1.3.3 Violence against women and girls in the military

Information received by an international organisation says that violence against women and girls performing armed National Service in the military has increased. Raping of girls and women as well as sexual abuse within the military is even worse than before. According to the organisation, the military used to have a system in which girls and women could win favour from a person with a higher rank, but in order to obtain good graces this could mean

⁵³ According to the Human Rights Watch organisation, Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, the 93-year-old Director of an Islamic school called Al Diaa, was arrested on 31 October 2017 after having openly objected to the intervention of the Eritrean government in the school's affairs. Other members of the school's management were also detained. The arrests were preceded by protests around the school, in which students of the school took part, among other people. The security forces dispersed the protests by shooting in the air and arresting people at the scene. (HRW 2019, pp. 26–27.) In March 2018, the Director of the school died in captivity for an unknown reason, four months after the arrest and without a trial. Another member of school management, Haji Ibrahim Younis, who was in his seventies, died in captivity in January 2019. The other members of the school's management who were arrested in October 2017 are still in detention. (HRW 2019, pp. 26–27; UN HRC 16.5.2019, p. 12.)

⁵⁴ International organisation 26.8.2019.

⁵⁵ International organisation 26.8.2019.

⁵⁶ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁵⁷ International organisation 26.8.2019.

⁵⁸ The government of Eritrea recognises four denominations: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Sunni Islam. (UN HRC 16.5.2019, p. 9.)

⁵⁹ International organisation 7.5.2019.

getting raped. In exchange, girls and women could receive some privileges, such as weekend or evening leave from service. The organisation says that girls or women are no longer offered such privileges, but cases of rape and sexual abuse have become even more serious than before. This has led to increased desertion from places of service.⁶⁰

1.3.4 Social media and the freedom of expression

According to an international organisation, a popular movement arose in Eritrea in spring 2019 that appeared in social media and as distribution of anti-government flyers.⁶¹ This was a campaign called *Enough*, arranged from diaspora, which was only visible on social media by August 2019. According to information provided by the organisation in August 2019, social media, i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have been shut down in Eritrea since the end of May 2019. Social media was closed down before Eritrea's Independence Day,⁶² when it was declared as a normal cautionary measure prior to the public holiday. However, social media has remained closed since then, and the only access to social media in Eritrea is through a Virtual Private Network (VPN).⁶³

According to the international organisation, the disappearance of Eritrea's former Minister of Finance⁶⁴ in autumn 2018 is an example of political freedom of expression in Eritrea in the time after the peace agreement.⁶⁵ The former Minister of Finance, who wrote a book criticising the government of Eritrea,⁶⁶ disappeared in September 2018, and his whereabouts⁶⁷ are unknown⁶⁸.

1.4 Leaving the country after the conclusion of the peace agreement

According to an international organisation, people in Eritrea were hopeful after the signing of the peace agreement, expecting reforms both within the country and in its external relations. As hopes for changes inside the country have gone unfulfilled, the hopefulness felt by Eritreans has given way to despair. The high hopes generated by the peace agreement and the ensuing disappointment for lack of desired amendments have made people even more deeply desperate than before.⁶⁹ According to the organisation, disappointment and the psychological stress caused by the situation are an additional layer to the mental burden felt

⁶⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁶¹ International organisation 26.8.2019; International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁶² Eritrea's Independence Day is the 24th of May.

⁶³ International organisation 26.8.2019.

⁶⁴ According to the human rights organisation Amnesty International, Berhane Abrehe, who served as Eritrea's Minister of Finance until 2014, was arrested on 17 September 2018. The arrest was made less than a week after the publication of his book *Eritrea Hageray*, which is critical of the government of Eritrea. (Amnesty International 19.9.2018.)

⁶⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁶⁶ International organisation 26.8.2019; UN HRC 16.5.2019, p. 6.

⁶⁷ According to a report on the human rights situation in Eritrea by the United Nations special rapporteur, 74-year-old Berhane Abrehe and his 60-year-old wife are both detained without charges, and the authorities have not disclosed where they are being held. The former Finance Minister's wife was arrested after her family member had illegally left the country. (UN HRC 16.5.2019, p. 6.)

⁶⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁶⁹ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

by Eritreans. According to information heard by the organisation, the mental state among Eritreans is so alarming that one can speak of a national emergency within and outside the country.⁷⁰

According to the international organisation, a tremendous number of people are still leaving Eritrea. The organisation says that at least 300 people exited Eritrea every day in April 2019. In one month, 7,000–9,000 individuals left the country, meaning at least 100,000 people per year.⁷¹ In the international organisation's opinion, in May 2019 the general situation in Eritrea had deteriorated significantly from before, and there were many more reasons for leaving the country, as completely random views of people as enemies of the State and persecution of religious groups had increased.⁷² The organisation's information says that especially young males left Eritrea earlier, but now even women, children and elderly people are fleeing the country.⁷³ Many young people, in particular, do not believe in change in Eritrea despite the peace agreement, so they prefer to exit the country.⁷⁴

Several interviewed Eritreans who had crossed the border into Ethiopia in May 2019 said that they want to see amendments in Eritrea but, in their view, nothing will change and the situation in Eritrea will only deteriorate. They said people in Eritrea are hopeless and believed that more people will continue to flee the country.⁷⁵ According to the experience of an Eritrean female who crossed the border into Ethiopia in spring 2019, peace was declared but nothing has changed in Eritrea, and her home country has no hope.⁷⁶

According to the international organisation, the latest estimate of the population of Eritrea is 2.6 million people. The capital city of Asmara has approximately 120,000–180,000 inhabitants. In the Eritrean countryside there are villages that are completely desolate, with houses abandoned. The organisation says that more people have left from the highlands than the lowlands. In Asmara, which is situated in the highland, the migration has not been as clearly visible as elsewhere, because it is the largest city in the country. According to information provided by the organisation in late April 2019, the departure of people has become more conspicuous than before also in Asmara, as migration out of the country has accelerated. City streets are emptier than before, with fewer people, especially youngsters, moving about.⁷⁷

According to the international organisation, it appears that young people have been brought from the rural areas to Asmara to fill up the streets. The organisation says that the youngsters have nice, clean clothes, but they are clearly young people from the countryside standing on the streets. In April 2019, the organisation first learned that there was a reward procedure for bringing people from rural areas to the capital city, to replace those who had left, as a reward for not leaving Eritrea. For other Eritreans, they are examples of rewarding people for not exiting the country. The organisation is unaware of what prizes these people are given, but it believes they may receive clothes or an opportunity to complete their National Service in an easier place of service.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁷¹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁷² International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁷³ International organisation 26.8.2019.

⁷⁴ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁷⁵ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

⁷⁶ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁷⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁷⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

2 Situation at the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Eritrea

2.1 Situation after the opening of border crossing points

The Governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia officially opened the border between the two countries on 11 September 2018.⁷⁹ After almost two decades, three border crossing points were opened on the border, between Zalambessa (ET) and Serha (ER), Bure (ET) and Debay Sima (ER),⁸⁰ and Rama (ET) and Adi Quala (ER)⁸¹. Later, on 7 January 2019, a fourth border crossing point was opened between Humera (ET) and Oum Hajer (ER).⁸² According to news reports, the border crossing points at Zalambessa and Bure were opened on 11 September 2018.⁸³ Two sources interviewed have differing information about the date when the border crossing point at Rama was opened.⁸⁴ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the border crossing point at Rama was opened at the same time as the one at Zalambessa. The organisation knows that the border crossing point at Rama was open two weeks after the opening of the border.⁸⁵ According to an Ethiopian authority, the border crossing point at Rama was not opened until October 2018, one month after Zalambessa.⁸⁶ On 16 September 2018, the news site TesfaNews reported on the opening of the border crossing point between Rama and Adi Quala on its Twitter account.⁸⁷

2.1.1 Crossing the border while the border crossing points were open

According to the international organisation, there were no border checks at the border crossing points when the border was open.⁸⁸ Organisations operating in Ethiopia also say that there were no restrictions at the border while it was open,⁸⁹ and people were able to pass in both directions across the boundary⁹⁰. According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans were not required to show an *exit visa* at the border after it had been opened. The organisation says that two weeks after the border was opened, Eritreans who crossed it at Rama said they had done so freely, without any checks. Their names were first recorded on the Ethiopian side, but they had not encountered any border formalities before that. The organisation is unaware whether the situation at Rama remained unchanged throughout the time when the border crossing point was open.⁹¹

Different estimates say that when the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was opened, 80,000– 120,000 left Eritrea during a few months. According to the international organisation, some of those who left in autumn 2018 returned and exited the country several times (see

⁷⁹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁸⁰ Reuters 11.9.2018; BBC 11.9.2019.

⁸¹ TesfaNews 16.9.2019.

⁸² The East African / AFP 7.1.2019.

⁸³ Reuters 11.9.2019; BBC 11.9.2019.

⁸⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

⁸⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁸⁶ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

⁸⁷ TesfaNews 16.9.2019.

⁸⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁸⁹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁹⁰ Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁹¹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

below).⁹² In September 2018 the number of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia grew significantly. Due to the peace agreement, crossing the border was suddenly much safer, and many Eritreans arrived at the border and crossed over to Ethiopia.⁹³ In September and October 2018, Ethiopian authorities received at most 800–900 Eritreans per day.⁹⁴ The number of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia saw intense growth in October 2018, when almost 13,000 of them registered as refugees during one month in the Tigray Region.⁹⁵ In autumn 2018 the registration centre at Endabaguna in the Tigray Region had, at most, 4,000 people, exceeding the centre's capacity eight times over.⁹⁶ After October, the number of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia decreased.⁹⁷

Many Eritreans arrived in Ethiopia for the purpose of family reunification, especially in October 2018. When the border was open and contacts by phone became possible between Ethiopia and Eritrea (see 4.6.1.), family members on opposite sides of the boundary were able to communicate with each other. Families were able to assess the situation and make a decision on bringing the family together. After the border was opened, the number of women and children crossing the border increased significantly. According to an anonymous source, at some point up to 90 per cent of Eritreans crossing the border with Ethiopia were women and children. People felt that it was safer to cross the border, and they were able to do so by road. Eritreans crossed the border along roads that were open, mainly through the border crossing points at Rama and Zalambessa.⁹⁸

When the border crossing points were open, anyone could cross over to Ethiopia, and different kinds of people moved across the boundary.⁹⁹ Besides women and children, more elderly individuals and people for whom leaving was more challenging left Eritrea.¹⁰⁰ There were more families on the move, for instance. According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, many Eritreans thought the border would only be open on a temporary basis, so they arrived there as quickly as they could.¹⁰¹

Road traffic between Eritrea and Ethiopia was opened,¹⁰² and people moved back and forth across the border, particularly for trading purposes.¹⁰³ According to the anonymous source, Eritrean vehicles moved in the Tigray Region in Ethiopia especially when the border crossing points were open.¹⁰⁴ According to the international organisation, those who left Eritrea in autumn 2018 included people who returned and exited the country several times. Reasons for returning included, e.g. business operations and the desire to secure the well-being of the family. Some may have taken food to their family in Eritrea before they left the country permanently. It also came as a surprise to some people that they needed a passport in order to leave Ethiopia, so some returned to the country to get their passport.¹⁰⁵

⁹² International organisation 29.4.2019.

⁹³ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁹⁴ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

⁹⁵ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁹⁶ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

⁹⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁹⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁹⁹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁰¹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁰² Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

¹⁰³ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁰⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

However, the international NGO operating in Ethiopia says that opening the border did not change the fact that leaving the army in Eritrea remained a punishable offence. Thus the situation of young men doing mandatory military service did not change to a material extent. According to the organisation, leaving the military remained an unlawful act, so illegal traffic across the border continued throughout the time when it was open.¹⁰⁶

2.1.2 Closing of border crossing points

According to an anonymous source, Eritrean refugees reported that Eritrea began to require an exit visa from citizens leaving the country at some point in December 2018. There is no precise information of when exit visas became mandatory. The source says that an exit visa was asked from everyone at border crossing points and those headed towards the border. According to the source, Eritrean refugees arriving in Ethiopia through the Afar Region¹⁰⁷ reported that Eritrean soldiers there demanded people to show their identity documents. To cross the border, people had to leave their documents with the soldiers as a guarantee for their return. The border situated in the Afar Region in the desert is more remote, so increasing the state's presence there is more difficult than on roads leading from Asmara to Rama and Zalambessa.¹⁰⁸

According to the international organisation, Eritreans were asked to show their identity cards at border crossing points possibly in 2019. The organisation says that, in principle, any identity card enabled a person to cross the border. According to the organisation, practices at border crossing points may have varied, depending on which border official happened to be working at the crossing point. Procedures followed at border crossing points may have been diversified, because the government of Eritrea has not necessarily issued any harmonised guidelines.¹⁰⁹

The border crossing points at Zalambessa and Bure were closed on about 26 December 2018. A new border crossing point was opened at Humera on 7 January 2019, for financial reasons.¹¹⁰ According to news sources, the border crossing point at Humera was closed on 18 April 2019.¹¹¹ The very last border crossing point at Bure was closed on 22 April 2019.¹¹²

According to the international organisation, in late 2019 when only one border crossing point¹¹³ was still open, apparently many people left Eritrean along unofficial routes. The organisation is aware of a person who tried to cross the border through the border crossing point¹¹⁴ nearest to Asmara in late April, but it was closed and the last one that was open was too far away for this individual.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁶ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁰⁷ The easternmost border crossing point at Bure is located in the Afar Region. (Africanews 23.4.2019.)

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁰⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹¹¹ 7D News 22.4.2019; Borkena Ethiopian News 22.4.2019.

¹¹² Africanews 23.4.2019; Borkena Ethiopian News 22.4.2019; 7D News 22.4.2019.

¹¹³ The border crossing point at Bure was the last one to remain open. (Africanews 23.4.2019; Borkena Ethiopian News 22.4.2019; 7D News 22.4.2019.)

¹¹⁴ According to an Ethiopian authority, the border crossing point closest to Asmara is at Zalambessa. (Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.)

¹¹⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

According to the sources interviewed, the decision to close the border crossing points came from Eritrea,¹¹⁶ and the border was unilaterally closed from the Eritrean side.¹¹⁷ The Ethiopian authority does not know why Eritrea closed the border crossing points between the countries.¹¹⁸ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the reasons for closing the border have not been publicly reported. The organisation says that one cannot say anything certain about the reasons why the border was closed, but opening the border had a financial impact on Eritrea and the markets in Eritrea. The organisation assesses that the situation was headed in a direction where Eritrea would have been forced to make at least financial reforms if the border had remained open.¹¹⁹ Another organisation operating in Ethiopia also believes that the closing of the border was largely related to commerce and the financial situation in Eritrea.¹²⁰

An international organisation believes the official reason for closing the border to be development of border mechanisms, customs fees and currency regulation in Eritrea. According to the organisation, Eritrean authorities have said that there would be control at the border and that it would not be open freely. The same organisation says that restrictions were placed on the border about the same time as an attempt was made to assassinate a Minister of the Government of Eritrea¹²¹ in Asmara in December 2018. According to another source heard by the organisation, these events were linked to each other. Eritrea woke up to the potential consequences of an open border. A great deal of weapons, illegal drugs and medicines have been brought to Eritrea in vehicles across the border, and Eritrea has also seen new animal-based diseases when people and animals moved across the open border. The organisation says that people in Eritrea knew to expect that the border would be closed as food, among other things, was hoarded in anticipation.¹²²

2.2 Situation after the closing of the border

According to several sources who were interviewed, the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was closed again in May 2019.¹²³ According to an Ethiopian authority, there is no border that is officially open between Eritrea and Ethiopia anymore. All the four main routes have been closed, and the border is not open at any point.¹²⁴ An international organisation

¹¹⁶ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019; International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹¹⁷ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹¹⁸ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹¹⁹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹²⁰ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹²¹ According to a report published on the *Ethiopia Observer* news site, Eritrea stepped up security after an assassination attempt against Sebhat Efrem, the Minister of Mines of Eritrea, but it is unclear whether the restrictions at the border were linked to the incident. (Ethiopia Observer 26.12.2018.) A news report on the *Borkena Ethiopian News* website said there was speculation on social media that the closing of the border was related to the attempt to assassinate the Minister. (Borkena Ethiopian News 27.12.2018.)

¹²² International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹²³ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019; Anonymous source C 16.5.2019; International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹²⁴ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

also says that the borders have been closed and no crossing points remain open.¹²⁵ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the border crossing points have been unilaterally closed from the Eritrean side.¹²⁶

An international organisation says that many Eritreans have been late in contemplating an exit from Eritrea. There are no more open routes through which people could leave the country. According to the organisation, there are still many people in Eritrea who would like to leave the country, but it is no longer as easy as when the border was open.¹²⁷

2.2.1 Border control at border crossing points

An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia says that Eritrean authorities do not allow any kind of traffic through the border crossing points. There are no restrictions on the Ethiopian side of the border.¹²⁸ According to another organisation operating in Ethiopia, the border is closed to both Eritreans and Ethiopians on Eritrea's side. No one is permitted to leave Eritrea, and people are not allowed to arrive at the border.¹²⁹ According to an Ethiopian authority, there is no official movement of people between Eritrea and Ethiopia.¹³⁰ The border crossing points have also been completely closed to commercial traffic.¹³¹

One international organisation is aware of two kinds of stories from border crossing points. Some information states that only traffic going in one direction is prohibited so that Eritreans are forbidden to leave the country, but that Ethiopians have been able to cross the border at some border crossing points. According to the most recent information, however, border crossing points are closed to traffic coming from both directions, with the distinction that vehicles with Eritrean licence plates have been able to return from Ethiopia to Eritrea. The organisation says that vehicles and passengers are possibly inspected at the border.¹³² An anonymous source says that fewer Eritrean vehicles have been moving in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia since the border was closed.¹³³

According to information provided by an anonymous source in May 2019, the Eritrean government requires an exit visa from every person leaving the country.¹³⁴ An international NGO operating in Ethiopia also presumes that the requirement for an exit visa has entered into effect in Eritrea again after the border was closed. According to the organisation, however, there is no full clarity of procedures at the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, since these have not been officially communicated at any stage.¹³⁵

According to an international organisation, the closed border crossing points are staffed and have border control, as people are turned away from the border on the Eritrean side.¹³⁶ According to an Ethiopian authority, Eritrean soldiers at Rama, for instance, are present on

¹²⁵ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹²⁶ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹²⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹²⁸ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 14.6.2019.

¹²⁹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹³⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹³¹ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹³² International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹³³ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹³⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹³⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹³⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

the Eritrean side of the border river, immediately on the other side of the bridge across the border.¹³⁷ In the assessment of an anonymous source, Eritrea carries out some kind of border control at border crossing points.¹³⁸ Another anonymous source says that Eritrea performs military control at border crossing points, and the situation is similar at all four border crossing points. According to the source, control on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border is implemented mostly on the Eritrean side of the border.¹³⁹ According to an Ethiopian authority, the border was closed by Eritrea and there is no specific border control on the Ethiopian side.¹⁴⁰ Contrary to other sources interviewed, one organisation says that there is no control at border crossing points on either side of the border.¹⁴¹

According to an international organisation, a large number of people tried to leave Eritrea after the border facing Ethiopia was closed. People who arrived at the border after the border crossing points had been closed were turned away. They were told that the border was closed and ordered to leave and go back to where they came from. According to the organisation, Eritreans have not faced any consequences from trying to leave the country through official border crossing points. However, the organisation says that the situation may vary from one day to the next, and there is no absolute certainty of the matter. It is also possible that individual people may suffer consequences at a later date.¹⁴²

According to rumours heard by the international organisation in the summer of 2019, people may have been allowed to leave Eritrea through border crossing points.¹⁴³ An Eritrean boy who was interviewed, and who had crossed the border to the Tigray Region in Ethiopia at the turn of April-May 2019, said that during his journey he came across Eritrean soldiers who asked the boy where he was headed. The boy answered that he was on his way to a wedding party with relatives in Rama, and they allowed him to proceed.¹⁴⁴

2.2.2 Shoot-to-kill-order

The interviewed sources are not certain whether a shoot-to-kill order¹⁴⁵ is still in force on the borders of Eritrea.¹⁴⁶ One international organisation believes that the shoot-to-kill order remains in effect on Eritrea's borders. The organisation believes that the situation is the same on all borders, even on the border with Sudan.¹⁴⁷ In late April 2019 the organisation heard comments according to which 'there is shooting again on the borders of Eritrea'. The

¹³⁷ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹³⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹³⁹ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

¹⁴⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹⁴¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 14.6.2019.

¹⁴² International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁴³ International organisation 26.8.2019.

¹⁴⁴ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁴⁵ The shoot-to-kill-order stipulates that anyone who tries to leave Eritrea illegally must be shot with deadly intent. (EASO 2015, s. 54.)

¹⁴⁶ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁴⁷ According to the international organisation, somewhere along the border between Eritrea and Sudan there is a field that has become a good route for leaving the country against a small fee. People pay farmers so they can leave the country by crossing the field at night time. The route in question is used frequently, the organisation reports. (International organisation 2019.)

organisation says that the shoot-to-kill order is implemented in very different ways. The situation at the Eritrean border can vary on a daily basis. Sometimes people are allowed to cross the border, but occasionally shots are fired.¹⁴⁸ In August 2019 the organisation was unaware of anyone having been shot at in recent times.¹⁴⁹

One anonymous source has not heard of Eritrean soldiers killing anyone on the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. According to the source, local people by the border would be readily informed if anyone had been killed.¹⁵⁰ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia also believes that if shooting deaths had occurred on the border, the organisation would have learned of them.¹⁵¹

In September 2019, an anonymous source said it had learned of information reported by Eritrean refugees, suggesting that the Eritrean military had again started to shoot at Eritreans trying to cross the border unlawfully. Refugees at border crossing points related that they had been shot at while crossing the border unlawfully and that they had been stopped by the military from a distance. However, there is no evidence or any report that the shots fired hit anyone. The sources are not aware of anyone being killed whilst crossing the border, or of anyone being injured at border crossing points between December 2018 and September 2019.¹⁵²

An Ethiopian authority says there are cases where Eritrean border guards apprehended Eritreans who attempted to cross the border into Ethiopia.¹⁵³ According to one Eritrean male who was interviewed, Eritrean soldiers chased him when he was crossing the border unlawfully between Adi Quala and Rama in spring 2019. The man said that the soldiers pointed their guns at him but did not shoot, so the man managed to get away.¹⁵⁴ According to a boy from Eritrea, in the spring of 2019 he and his friends ran away from Eritrean soldiers chasing them in the border region. The boy managed to run away from the soldiers and cross the border.¹⁵⁵

2.2.3 Disputed areas

Despite the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the border between the two countries is still problematic.¹⁵⁶ The border still has not been marked,¹⁵⁷ and there is no agreement on border lines.¹⁵⁸ Disputed areas near the border have remained under dispute. An international organisation's view is that if Eritrea demanded marking the border, this would cause conflicts on both sides, so Eritrea prefers the situation where the border is not marked.¹⁵⁹ According to an anonymous source, no significant changes have occurred on

¹⁴⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁴⁹ International organisation 26.8.2019.

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

¹⁵¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁵² Anonymous source B 4.9.2019.

¹⁵³ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁵⁴ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁵⁵ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁵⁶ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁵⁷ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁵⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁵⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia in spite of the peace agreement. The source says it is uncertain whether the 'no war, no peace' situation¹⁶⁰ that prevailed between the countries has actually changed.¹⁶¹

2.3 Crossing the border into Ethiopia

2.3.1 Number and profile of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia

The peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea has not stopped Eritreans from fleeing their home country.¹⁶² Whether the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea is open or closed does not have a significant impact on the influx of refugees, either. Eritreans arrive in Ethiopia irrespective of whether it is illegal or not.¹⁶³ Many Eritreans cross the border unlawfully, even if the border is closed.¹⁶⁴ According to the international organisation, illegal departures from the country continue at least unabated, but they may even have increased. The organisation says that at least 300 people exited Eritrea every day in April 2019, and 7,000–9,000 individuals left the country unlawfully in one month.¹⁶⁵

Many Eritreans cross the border into Ethiopia every day even after the border was closed.¹⁶⁶ In May 2019, Ethiopian authorities received 200–250 Eritreans who had crossed the border every day.¹⁶⁷ After Christmas 2018, the number of Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia began to stabilise at 4,000–6,000 new arrivals each month.¹⁶⁸ The daily numbers vary to some degree. Public holidays may influence the rate at which Eritreans arrive in Ethiopia. For example, fewer Eritreans arrive during Easter because they spend the holiday with their families.¹⁶⁹

In May 2019, 50–70 Eritreans who had crossed the border arrived every day at the Fatsi collection point (see. 4.1.1.), which receives the highest number of new arrivals in Tigray. According to an Ethiopian authority, the number of new arrivals at Fatsi has not decreased after the closing of the border; rather, it has increased.¹⁷⁰ That same month, 60–70 Eritreans who had crossed the border arrived at the Rama collection point every day. On average, the same number of Eritreans had arrived at the collection point each day during the previous two months. Before that, there had been more than 120 new arrivals every day.¹⁷¹

According to an anonymous source, in May 2019 approximately half of the new arrivals were men, the other half were women. The same source says that a large number of young people 18–24 years of age cross the border.¹⁷² According to an international NGO operating

¹⁶⁰ Since the end of the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (2000), the government of Eritrea has deemed Eritrea to be in a 'no war, no peace' situation, in which the country is not at war but is also not at peace. (EASO 2015, pp. 16, 23, 30.)

¹⁶¹ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

¹⁶² International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁶³ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

¹⁶⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁶⁵ International organisation 29.4.2018.

¹⁶⁶ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁶⁷ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

¹⁷⁰ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

¹⁷¹ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁷² Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

in Ethiopia, the situation after the closing of the border is the same as before it was opened; a high number of young men and especially young boys cross the border. The organisation believes that families find crossing the border to be dangerous when it is closed.¹⁷³ Another organisation operating in Ethiopia also says that the majority of Eritreans arriving there are young people and children.¹⁷⁴ In mid-May 2019, approximately 60 per cent of the Eritreans who had arrived at the Rama collection point were males. Most people arriving at the collection point are young people aged between 15 and 24 years who do not have a family.¹⁷⁵

2.3.2 Crossing the border along unofficial routes

According to the sources interviewed, Eritreans cross the border into Ethiopia illegally, along unofficial routes and by taking detours.¹⁷⁶ When the border is closed, Eritreans walk past the official border crossing points to cross the border.¹⁷⁷ Eritreans who come along unofficial routes cross the border by foot. Some also use donkeys and camels to move around.¹⁷⁸

The closing of the border crossing points at Rama and Zalambessa in late 2018 did not change the mobility of Eritreans: in fact, they continued to cross the border unofficially.¹⁷⁹ Eritreans who cross the border into Ethiopia near Rama tend to use transport up to Adi Quala, which is the town closest to the border on the Eritrean side. From Adi Quala, Eritreans walk for 6–7 hours to Rama on the Ethiopian side.¹⁸⁰ According to an Eritrean man who walked from Adi Quala to Rama in spring 2019, there is a checkpoint of Eritrean soldiers between Adi Quala and Rama¹⁸¹. He crossed the border by taking a detour through rough terrain in the mountains. The man said that he started walking in the evening and the journey lasted for 10 hours.¹⁸² One Eritrean male interviewee, who crossed the border to Ethiopia in May 2019, said that he travelled to Adi Quala by car and walked to Rama from there.¹⁸³

Many Eritreans who cross the border near Zalambessa first travel by bus to Serha close to the Ethiopian border, and then continue by foot across the border to avoid the checkpoint. Also, some interviewed Eritreans who had crossed the border near Zalambessa in May said that they had travelled through Senafe and Serha.¹⁸⁴ According to an Ethiopian authority, Eritreans do not cross the border at Zalambessa along the road: they take a detour instead to avoid the Eritrean checkpoint situated near the border.¹⁸⁵ For example, a group of three

¹⁷³ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁷⁴ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

¹⁷⁵ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁷⁶ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 14.6.2019; Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; International organisation 13.5.2019.

¹⁷⁷ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 14.6.2019.

¹⁷⁸ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁸⁰ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁸¹ According to an Ethiopian authority, Eritrean soldiers at Rama are present on the Eritrean side of the border river, immediately on the other side of the bridge across the border (see 2.2.1.). (Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.)

¹⁸² Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁸³ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019.

¹⁸⁴ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

¹⁸⁵ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

Eritrean men who crossed the border in May 2019 said that they did not go across at Zalambessa due to the Eritrean military's checkpoint there: they crossed the border on the mountains instead.¹⁸⁶ One Eritrean female who crossed the border in spring 2019 first arrived at Zalambessa but the border there was closed, so she took the bus to Senafe where she walked across, along an unofficial route.¹⁸⁷

Most interviewed Eritreans who had crossed the border to the Tigray Region in Ethiopia in the spring of 2019 had not encountered any problems on their way to the border or while crossing it.¹⁸⁸ In the view of a few Eritreans interviewed in May 2019, crossing the border is easier than before, which convinced them to leave Eritrea.¹⁸⁹ Some interviewed Eritreans had come across Eritrean soldiers in the border region.¹⁹⁰ A few interviewees said that they ran away from the soldiers who chased after them.¹⁹¹ A group of three Eritrean men said they saw Eritrean soldiers en route but did not have any problems. On the way, the men were afraid that soldiers would find them. One Eritrean woman said she was aware of soldiers and was afraid of them, but she did not see any soldiers while crossing the border.¹⁹² An Ethiopian authority is aware of cases where Eritrean border guards apprehended people who tried to get into Ethiopia.¹⁹³

One source says that hyenas are the most significant threat caused by the environment that Eritreans face when crossing the border. According to the source, hyenas have injured people and instigate fear. Eritreans tend to move in groups in order to frighten the hyenas away.¹⁹⁴ Some Eritreans have said that other Eritreans robbed their belongings during the trip across the border.¹⁹⁵

Communities living on different sides of the border region between Eritrea and Ethiopia are closely linked to one another.¹⁹⁶ People living on different sides of the border have good relations with each other, and they are able to easily communicate with one another. According to an anonymous source, it is possible to cross the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia in both directions on foot, and people are able to cross it easily. They do this illegally, on foot. Some people also engage in illicit trading across the borders. Small quantities of commodities are transported across the border, along unofficial routes, using donkeys and camels. Outside the official border crossing points, people can easily take cattle from Eritrea to the market in Tigray, Ethiopia and engage in illegal cattle trading.¹⁹⁷ According to the

¹⁸⁶ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

¹⁸⁷ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁸⁸ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁸⁹ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁹⁰ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁹¹ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

¹⁹² Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

¹⁹³ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁹⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

¹⁹⁵ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

¹⁹⁶ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

international organisation, there was also some trading across the border in 2017 that was allowed by Eritrean and Ethiopian authorities.¹⁹⁸

2.3.3 Checkpoints on the Eritrean side of the border

There are many checkpoints on the main roads of Eritrea that control the movement of people.¹⁹⁹ According to an anonymous source, Eritrean refugees have reported that there are more and more checkpoints on roads leading from Asmara to Ethiopia.²⁰⁰ An international organisation also says that the number of roadside checkpoints in Eritrea has increased (see 1.1.3.).²⁰¹ After the closing of the border crossing points, Eritreans have taken detours to the border,²⁰² since they come across checkpoints on the official routes²⁰³. After the increase in checkpoints and since the requirement of an exit visa took effect, Eritreans heading for the border must move more irregularly than before within Eritrea. According to the anonymous source, Eritreans headed for the border usually leave the vehicle before the checkpoint and then walk for several hours. After that, they may get on another bus and keep moving until the next checkpoint, from where they continue their journey on foot, following the same procedure.²⁰⁴

According to an Eritrean woman who crossed the border near Zalambessa in May 2019, there are checkpoints on the way to the border but sometimes no soldiers are present. An Eritrean male who crossed the border in the same area around the same time said that there is a checkpoint at Adi Keyh, and to pass it one must choose an appropriate moment when the soldiers take a break.²⁰⁵ According to the account of an Eritrean man who crossed the border in spring 2019, there is a checkpoint of Eritrean soldiers between Adi Quala and Rama.²⁰⁶ One Eritrean male interviewee who walked from Mendefera to the border and crossed it near Rama in May 2019 came across three checkpoints on his way to the border.²⁰⁷

2.4 Unaccompanied minors

Among Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia, there is an exceptionally high number of underage children who are unaccompanied or have been separated from their parents. The number of unaccompanied Eritrean children and those separated from their parents is remarkable, and that figure has increased significantly compared with previous years. In some months, more than 2,000 unaccompanied Eritrean minors have arrived in Ethiopia, one-third of the whole Eritrean population arriving during the month.²⁰⁸ In February 2019, approximately 1,000 unaccompanied minors²⁰⁹ arrived in Ethiopia, and in March 2019 that figure was 1,700.²¹⁰ The

¹⁹⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

¹⁹⁹ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁰⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁰¹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁰² International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁰³ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁰⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁰⁵ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

²⁰⁶ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²⁰⁷ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019.

²⁰⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁰⁹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

youngest unaccompanied minors are 12 to 13 years old, and the majority of them are 16–17 years of age.²¹¹

2.4.1 Reasons for leaving

For Eritrean families, one survival method²¹² is to send the most able-bodied and independent family member, usually the male provider for the family, to a foreign country. In Eritrea, the oldest boy in a family usually feels responsible for providing for the family; boys are expected to be able to leave the country and provide for their family. Boys know that recruitment to National Service is approaching, and if they stay in the National Service, they cannot provide for their family during service (see 1.2.2.). Thus boys feel that they have to get out of the country.²¹³

One Eritrean male interviewed, who had lived at the Mai-Aini refugee camp for four years, said he and his family left Eritrea because he was unable to take care of his family due to National Service performed in the military. Also, he wanted better treatment for his child who had health problems.²¹⁴ One Eritrean female interviewed, who crossed the border to Ethiopia in May 2019, said that she was planning to go abroad so she could support her family living in Eritrea.²¹⁵

According to an anonymous source, decisions by unaccompanied Eritrean children to leave their home country do not always seem like joint decisions made by the family or reasoned decisions made in the light of adequate information. According to the source, most unaccompanied minors say that they left without telling their parents, and that the parents are unaware that they are in Ethiopia. There are minors who leave very abruptly. Some children leave when prompted or pressured by their friends. Many of the younger children, in particular, say that they followed others and did not even know they were en route to Ethiopia.²¹⁶

According to the same source, many unaccompanied Eritrean children say they left the home country because they did not have any family members left there. The children's family members, relatives, members of the community and teachers have left, and this forces the children to leave the country also.²¹⁷ According to an international organisation, rather many children are left in the care of their grandparents or relatives in Eritrea, after both parents had fled the country. The organisation estimates that there are only a few small children living on the main street in Asmara of whom it is not known whether they have parents. The organisation estimates that there are more teenage street children in Asmara whose both parents have left the country. They may receive some support from their relatives.²¹⁸

One Eritrean boy who was interviewed had crossed the border to Ethiopia alone in May 2019, saying that he left Eritrea because he had health issues that did not respond to medical

²¹⁰ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

²¹¹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²¹² The Eritrean population is dependent on remittances from Eritreans living abroad. (International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.)

²¹³ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²¹⁴ Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²¹⁵ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

²¹⁶ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²¹⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²¹⁸ International organisation 7.5.2019.

treatment²¹⁹ received in Eritrea. According to his account, the boy had not received permission to leave Eritrea to receive medical care abroad, though he had applied for permission for three years.²²⁰

Unaccompanied Eritrean minors who arrive in Ethiopia generally have not completed secondary education.²²¹ If they graduate from upper secondary school, they are recruited to Sawa²²² or military training, so they decide to leave at an early age.²²³ Some unaccompanied Eritrean minors interviewed, who had crossed the border to Ethiopia in the spring of 2019, had dropped out of school because they were afraid of being recruited into National Service. One 16-year-old Eritrean boy said he had been taken to a camp in Nakfa in his home country. According to the boy, even 15–16-year-olds are taken to Nakfa and from there later to Sawa. The boy said that many were taken to Nakfa especially after the border had been opened. According to the boy's account, he was not given military training in Nakfa; he performed tasks related to the conservation of the soil instead. The boy, like many others, managed to escape from the camp.²²⁴

2.4.2 Movement across the border into Ethiopia and back to Eritrea

According to an anonymous source, whether the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia is open or closed does not seem very relevant for the movement of unaccompanied children coming from Eritrea or their ability to get to Ethiopia. Children move across the border with ease.²²⁵ Some interviewed Eritrean minors who had crossed the border to the Tigray Region in Ethiopia in the spring of 2019 said that they crossed the border alone, and no one advised them as to which route to take. One interviewed Eritrean boy said that he joined some Ethiopian merchants from Rama who were returning to their home town. Two interviewed Eritrean girls travelled together as part of a group. According to their account, the girls paid 50 Eritrean *nakfas*²²⁶ for crossing the border, but it was unclear whom they paid.²²⁷

One anonymous source is aware of unaccompanied Eritrean children arriving in Ethiopia who moved back and forth²²⁸ across the border. According to the source's observations, some unaccompanied Eritrean children who had arrived in Ethiopia returned to Eritrea and

²¹⁹ In Eritrea, availability of even some basic medicine is poor, and what is available is mostly counterfeit medicine. (International organisation 26.8.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.)

²²⁰ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

²²¹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²²² In Eritrea, all students at secondary educational institutions complete their last, 12th school year, in the Warsai Yekalo school on Sawa's military camp in western Eritrea. The school year includes military training for approximately six months. Sawa serves as a recruitment channel to National Service. (HRW 2019, pp. 2–3, 30–32.)

²²³ Anonymous source C 13.5.2019.

²²⁴ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²²⁵ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²²⁶ Approximately 3 euros. (XE Currency Converter 6.11.2019.)

²²⁷ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²²⁸ According to the international organisation, those who left Eritrea in autumn 2018 included people who returned and exited the country several times. Reasons for returning included, e.g. business operations and the desire to secure the well-being of the family. Some may have taken food to their family in Eritrea before they left the country permanently (see 2.1.1.). (International organisation 2019.)

then came back to Ethiopia in spring 2019. Some children returned to Eritrea to see how their family members were doing and to assess the situation after the border was opened. In spring 2019, some of the same children came back to Ethiopia. The source had observed more movement in the direction of Eritrea recently. According to the source, children may have returned to Eritrea while the border was either open or closed.²²⁹

An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is also aware of unaccompanied Eritrean minors who arrived in Ethiopia, and who presumably returned on their own to Eritrea in late 2018 and in 2019. In spring 2019, some of them returned to Ethiopia. According to the organisation, children's parents have ordered them to return to Ethiopia because of the assistance and education available at refugee camps.²³⁰ According to another organisation operating in Ethiopia, some unaccompanied Eritrean children who had arrived in Ethiopia may have returned to Eritrea on their own. Some spontaneous movement may have occurred across the open border.²³¹

3 Eritrean government's attitudes towards returnees and illegal exit

3.1 Situation of returnees

According to an international organisation, many people believed in investments and the return of the diaspora after the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia was signed, but this has not come to pass. The organisation says that Eritreans will not return to live in Eritrea permanently, because the changes that had been anticipated in the country have not taken place. Members of the diaspora visit Eritrea especially during the wedding season, at Christmas, and at Easter. The organisation is unaware of any changes in the conditions on which these people visit Eritrea.²³²

According to the same organisation, no large-scale returns to Eritrea have been carried out. There has also been no large-scale, voluntary, permanent migration to Eritrea. Therefore, the organisation believes that the treatment of people returning to Eritrea and possible consequences of returns can only be evaluated at a theoretical level. In the organisation's view, no one is certain of how returnees are treated or of their possibilities to build a new life in Eritrea.²³³

According to information reported to the international organisation, in January 2019 some Eritreans, who wanted to go back to their home country of their own free will, were returned from Libya to Eritrea. In January 2019, a total of 26 individuals in three different groups returned from Libya to Eritrea. The organisation says that there were some difficulties with the return process. For instance, it is unclear where the returnees spent their first night after arrival and in which circumstances, or how they have been treated. According to the organisation, representatives of the Eritrean government met with the returnees. The organisation is unaware of the whereabouts of the Eritreans who returned from Libya voluntarily, but it

²²⁹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²³⁰ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²³¹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²³² International organisation 29.4.2019.

²³³ International organisation 29.4.2019.

believes that they are performing the National Service. The organisation does not know whether voluntary returns from Libya to Eritrea will continue.²³⁴

According to the international organisation, people in Eritrea experience the need to obtain a passport from another country, as it provides additional security against a government that treats people poorly and arbitrarily. However, the organisation says that another country's passport does not guarantee protection for people who criticise the Government of Eritrea. Examples of this are a Swedish person with dual citizenship²³⁵ and a young woman from the United States²³⁶, who are in detention in Eritrea. The organisation believes that Eritrea treats all people from that country as Eritreans, regardless of their passport. According to the organisation, the government of Eritrea is careful to treat Eritrean returnees as Eritreans.²³⁷

3.2 Returning from Ethiopia to Eritrea across the land border

According to an anonymous source, many Eritrean refugees report that they have tried to return from Ethiopia to Eritrea but have been stopped and identified by Eritrean authorities.²³⁸ An international organisation says that vehicles with Eritrean licence plates have been able to return from Ethiopia to Eritrea through closed border crossing points. According to the organisation, vehicles and passengers are possibly inspected.²³⁹

According to an anonymous source's observations, some unaccompanied Eritrean children who had arrived in Ethiopia returned across the border to Eritrea in spring 2019 (see 2.4.2.).²⁴⁰ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is also aware of unaccompanied Eritrean minors who arrived in Ethiopia, and who presumably managed to return on their own to Eritrea in late 2018 and in 2019.²⁴¹ According to the sources, some of them came back to Ethiopia in the spring of 2019.²⁴² An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is unaware of any major problems or reprisals encountered by unaccompanied Eritrean minors who came back to Ethiopia upon their return to Eritrea.²⁴³

According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, some Eritrean children who arrived in Ethiopia alone have regretted crossing the border. The organisation knows of unaccompanied children who have expressed their wish to return to their home country. These were children under the age of 15 who joined someone else to cross the border, but then noticed that life at the refugee camp was difficult. The organisation says that re-uniting

²³⁴ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²³⁵ According to a report on the human rights situation in Eritrea by the United Nations special rapporteur, journalist Dawit Isaak, who is a citizen of both Eritrea and Sweden, has been detained in Eritrea since September 2001. (UN HRC 16.5.2019, p. 13.)

²³⁶ According to the Human Rights Watch organisation, Chiham Ali Abdu, who is a citizen of the United States and the daughter of Eritrea's former Minister of Transport and Communications, has been under arrest in Eritrea since December 2012. Chiham Ali Abdu was 15 years old at the time of her arrest. (HRW 3.4.2019.)

²³⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²³⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²³⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁴⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁴¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁴² International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁴³ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

such children with their parents is very difficult, almost impossible. The organisation is not aware of any Eritrean children who would have returned to Eritrea, but says that children may have gone back to Eritrea at their own initiative and on their own across the open border.²⁴⁴

According to an anonymous source, Eritreans who arrive in Ethiopia must have a very good motive, such as the death of a person close to them or marriage, to return to Eritrea. People only cross the border for a good reason, and they do it temporarily and with care to avoid being caught. When the border is closed, Eritreans must invest money in an illegal border crossing to enter Eritrea. Either they take the risk or pay a smuggler to cross the border more safely.²⁴⁵

According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, a return to Eritrea is a subject that causes fear among Eritreans at refugee camps in Tigray. The organisation says that most Eritreans who arrive in Ethiopia have no interest or desire to return to Eritrea. The organisation does not know any Eritrean individuals who have said that they only came to Ethiopia for a visit and who have then returned to Eritrea. A few of the Eritreans interviewed by the organisation have said that they have no reason to return, because things in Eritrea remain unchanged and they do not see any possibilities for a future after returning.²⁴⁶

According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans appear to feel more vulnerable in Ethiopia than before the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The organisation says that some Eritreans are concerned about how Ethiopia will treat Eritrean refugees after the peace agreement. The fear is that, as a consequence of the good relations between the countries, the government of Ethiopia could decide to hand Eritreans over to the Government of Eritrea. The organisation is unaware of any signs of such handovers, but Eritreans seem to be afraid of this. The organisation says that Eritreans also fear that there may be more spies from Eritrea than before at refugee camps in Tigray.²⁴⁷

3.3 Attitudes towards illegal exit from the country

Crossing the border unlawfully from Eritrea is clearly an act against the government of the country. The international organisation believes that the authorities may become aware of any illegal departure from the country. According to the organisation, the key question is what possibilities the State of Eritrea has to keep a record of people who have fled the country. Although it is impossible to obtain public statistics from Eritrea, the organisation believes that a police state like Eritrea has plenty of information about its citizens. However, the organisation does not know how a person's illegal exit from the country is revealed when so many people leave Eritrea. The organisation is aware that if those doing their National Service do not register as being present on a regular basis, this may be recorded in files kept by the authorities.²⁴⁸

According to the international organisation, Eritrea has a two-fold attitude towards those who have left Eritrea, so people are treated in different ways at the border also. Occasionally border guards have allowed people to cross the border, at other times there have been

²⁴⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁴⁵ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁴⁶ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁴⁷ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁴⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

shots fired at the border. According to the organisation, in the President's opinion individuals who are opposed to the government and dissidents who do not side with the system can leave the country.²⁴⁹ The organisation says that the government of Eritrea also wants people to leave the country, because Eritreans living abroad are a major source of income for the State, due to the low tax payable to Eritrea. Also, the Eritrean population is dependent on remittances from Eritreans living in foreign countries.²⁵⁰

According to the international organisation, there are various kinds of people among those who leave. Some have left Eritrea illegally across the border, whilst others have entered Ethiopia legally while the border was open. The organisation does not know whether these two groups are treated in differing ways.²⁵¹ According to an anonymous source, people headed from Ethiopia back to Eritrea are apprehended if they left the country unlawfully in the first place. The source says Eritrean refugees have reported that doing so may get them into trouble, such as being arrested. According to the source, if a person has left the National Service, there is no reason why that individual would not be taken back into National Service.²⁵²

The international organisation is not aware of the consequences that an unlawful exit from the country causes. However, the organisation knows that family members and friends of those who have left the country illegally face immediate danger in Eritrea, and people may go missing (see 3.5.). The organisation believes that if such a punishment is used against family members and friends of people who leave the country unlawfully, there is no reason to doubt that the same punishment is used against those who return to the country, or that the government of Eritrea has at least a suspicious attitude towards them.²⁵³

3.4 Possible consequences of an attempt to leave the country illegally

An international NGO operating in Ethiopia knows of many Eritreans who have been sent to prison for attempting to leave Eritrea unlawfully. When the border was open, the organisation interviewed many Eritreans who had tried to cross the border earlier but were caught and then spent several months in prison. They included men and women but no children.²⁵⁴

An Eritrean female interviewee, who crossed the border to Ethiopia when it was open, said that she had been detained a few years earlier while trying to cross the border illegally. First she was under arrest in Adi Quala for three days, then for about a week in Mendefera, one month at a detention centre, and nine months at a military camp. The Eritrean woman said that there were other women in prisons during her captivity. At the military camp, for instance, there were 1,500 female detainees who were apprehended while trying to cross the border or during raids. According to the woman, some female detainees had children with them in prison. The woman said that if you are caught three times for trying to cross the border, you must prepare food or make coffee for military leaders, or 'something worse' in her words. After her imprisonment, the woman was sent back to the military where she

²⁴⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019; International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵¹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵² Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

²⁵³ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

served for three years before her escape.²⁵⁵ One Eritrean male interviewee, who crossed the border to Ethiopia in May 2019, said that he had attempted to cross the border 10 years earlier but was placed under arrest for two years.²⁵⁶

According to information received by the international organisation in April 2019, attempting to cross the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia at an official border crossing point, after the border was closed, did not result in any consequences. People who had come to the border were turned away and ordered to leave and head back. However, the organisation says that the situation may vary from one day to the next, and it is not certain whether attempting to leave the country illegally at an official border crossing points leads to any consequences. It is also possible that individual people may suffer consequences at a later date.²⁵⁷

3.5 Threat against family members of people who have left the country illegally

According to an international organisation, family members and friends of those who have left the country illegally face immediate danger in Eritrea, and people may go missing.²⁵⁸ The organisation knows that a representative of the Eritrean government has said that leaving the country will result in consequences. However, those who have left the country cannot be punished while they are abroad; the organisation believes this means that the consequences fall on those who remain in the country.²⁵⁹

According to an international organisation, there are also people whose family members are not subjected to consequences, because the Eritrean government knows that Eritreans who go abroad bring additional income to the State.²⁶⁰ According to an international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia, it cannot be said that all family members of those who flee the country face problems, but one also cannot say that none of them do. The problems that family members may encounter depend on the person who has escaped, says the organisation. In its opinion, family members may face problems in cases involving National Service. For example, if a person who is supposed to register for National Service in the next few months suddenly goes missing, family members may run into trouble. According to the organisation, such problems are not necessarily serious.²⁶¹

According to an account by an Eritrean male who crossed the border into Ethiopia in 2019, his mother was arrested after he did not return to National Service from his leave. The man said that his mother was under arrest for a month, but when it became certain that the son was no longer within reach in Eritrea, the mother was released. An Eritrean female interviewee, who crossed the border to Ethiopia when it was open, said that she feared for her family after she failed to return to the military and went into hiding in Asmara with a relative. According to the woman, the authorities picked up her mother for questioning.

²⁵⁵ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²⁵⁶ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019.

²⁵⁷ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵⁸ International organisation 29.4.2019.

²⁵⁹ International organisation 26.8.2019.

²⁶⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019.

²⁶¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

However, the mother did not know that her daughter had escaped, and the shocked mother was sent back home.²⁶²

Eritreans who leave the country know that they place their immediate and extended families at risk by leaving the country illegally.²⁶³ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia says that, in most cases, Eritreans do not tell anyone that they are about to leave the country.²⁶⁴ A young Eritrean female interviewee, who crossed the border to Ethiopia in May 2019, said that she made the decision to leave by herself and did not want to tell her family members about her departure.²⁶⁵

4 Eritreans in Ethiopia

4.1 Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region

4.1.1 Entry points and collection points

Ethiopia has 18 entry points and three collection points near its border with Eritrea, which are maintained by the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs. Eritreans crossing the border seek their way through entry points or directly to collection points, from where they are moved to the registration centre at Endabaguna. After registration, Eritrean refugees are moved to four refugee camps situated in the Tigray Region.²⁶⁶

Entry points located near the border are the first locations Eritreans pass through after arriving in Ethiopia.²⁶⁷ Eritreans who have crossed the border can seek their way to locals or the Ethiopian military, a police station or directly to the Ethiopian immigration authority. From there, they are referred to entry points staffed by employees of the Ethiopian immigration authority.²⁶⁸ Entry points are temporary waiting areas where Eritrean arrivals receive initial support before moving to collection points. However, according to one source interviewed,²⁶⁹ not all of the 18 entry points are in operation.²⁷⁰

Entry points are more isolated than collection points, which are located slightly further away from the border.²⁷¹ In May 2019, the Ethiopian immigration authority maintained three collection points in the Tigray Region, at Rama, Fatsi²⁷² and Adi Nebreib²⁷³. From entry points, Eritreans proceed to collection points or, if possible, they go directly to collection points after having crossed the border.²⁷⁴ According to one source interviewed,²⁷⁵ entry points provide

²⁶² Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

²⁶³ International organisation 7.5.2019.

²⁶⁴ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

²⁶⁵ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

²⁶⁶ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁶⁷ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2015.

²⁶⁸ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁶⁹ During the fact-finding mission, various representatives of the same Ethiopian authority were interviewed on three different days at three different locations.

²⁷⁰ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁷¹ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁷² Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁷³ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

²⁷⁴ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

transport to a collection point or straight to the registration centre at Endabaguna.²⁷⁶ However, Eritreans walk to the Rama collection point, for instance, from the border on their own.²⁷⁷ All the interviewed Eritreans who had crossed the border to Ethiopia near Rama had walked from the border to the collection point at Rama.²⁷⁸ Some may walk up to 100 kilometres, in total, on their way to Ethiopia. Eritreans sometimes receive assistance and support from the Ethiopian military at the border.²⁷⁹

Most Eritreans who arrive at the Fatsi collection point cross the border at the entry points in Zalambessa, Sobeya, Dohan, and Endalgeida. Some Eritreans come to the point from the direction of Zalambessa. Some come through the city of Adigrat (ET) from where, according to the source, there is bus transport to the Fatsi collection point. Eritreans are given instructions on how to reach the point. The collection point at Fatsi was moved for security reasons from Zalambessa to Fatsi, further away from the border, in spring 2019. According to the source, Eritrean soldiers had tried to bring back²⁸⁰ Eritreans from Zalambessa on the Ethiopian side. The source says there is an Eritrean checkpoint at the border, near Zalambessa. No initial registration of the names of Eritrean arrivals was made at Zalambessa in May 2019.²⁸¹

Collection points register the names and basic information of Eritrean arrivals.²⁸² They also provide people who arrive there with water, food and shelter.²⁸³ People are supposed to stay at collection points for at most one day before being transferred to the registration centre at Endabaguna. However, in May 2019 some people had to wait at collection points for a few days before a transfer to the registration centre, because the collection points were overcrowded.²⁸⁴ In May 2019, 50–70 Eritreans who had crossed the border arrived every day at the collection point in Fatsi, which receives the highest number of arrivals.²⁸⁵ At the Rama collection point, which receives the second highest number of arrivals,²⁸⁶ the corresponding figure is 65–70 in one month.²⁸⁷ Sometimes there is a daily transport from collection points to Endabaguna, depending on the number of people at the point,²⁸⁸ but there is no transport

²⁷⁵ During the fact-finding mission, various representatives of the Ethiopian authority were interviewed on three different days at three different locations.

²⁷⁶ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁷⁷ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁷⁸ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019.

²⁷⁹ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁸⁰ An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is aware of rumours on social media according to which vehicles of intelligence troops and armed forces have moved from Eritrea to Ethiopia, apprehending certain Eritrean individuals in the Tigray Region. According to the rumours, a high-profile individual with connections with the Eritrean government and authorities had crossed the border, after which Eritrean intelligence and military troops secretly entered Ethiopia to bring back important persons. The rumours say that authorities in Tigray apprehended some members of the Eritrean intelligence and military troops. (International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.)

²⁸¹ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

²⁸² Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁸³ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

²⁸⁴ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019; Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁸⁵ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

²⁸⁶ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

²⁸⁷ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁸⁸ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

on weekends²⁸⁹. Such transport is handled with one or two vehicles, depending on the day. Lorries used for transport have room for approximately 50 people on the bed in the rear.²⁹⁰

4.1.2 Registration of refugees

From collection points in the Tigray Region, Eritreans are transported to the registration centre at Endabaguna, which is maintained by the Ethiopian immigration authority and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Ethiopian immigration authority carries out the first registration and grants the status of refugee to individuals. The UNHCR performs the second registration. During registration, asylum seekers are interviewed for 10–15 minutes to record background information about the person in the register. Also, biometric data is collected from all persons at least five years of age, for purposes of fingerprint and iris identification, which is added to the UNHCR's international database.²⁹¹ According to information received in May 2019, refugees are not registered in the capital Addis Ababa.²⁹²

As proof of registration and refugee status, refugees are issued with a joint registration certificate by the Ethiopian immigration authority and the UNHCR. For the purpose of accepting food aid at a refugee camp, they are also given a ration card of the UNHCR, which is perforated upon use. The ration card has a barcode that includes unique identifiers, such as an individual number code. In the future, refugees will also be issued with an individual identity card in addition to a registration certificate.²⁹³

In Ethiopia, Eritreans are granted a refugee status automatically. Individual screenings are made only in exceptional cases. During an individual screening, the asylum seeker is interviewed and a further investigation is conducted. An individual interview can be conducted, for example, if it turns out that the person has committed an offence, such as manslaughter, in Eritrea. The registration centre in Endabaguna has employees of the Ethiopian immigration authority specialised in establishing whether a person is from Eritrea or Ethiopia, for instance. For determining nationality,²⁹⁴ the staff use, e.g. language tests to identify various dialects of Tigrinya. Every year, 5–10 individuals receive a negative decision. Those who are given a negative decision are able to appeal it to the Administrative Court in Addis Ababa.²⁹⁵

In mid-May 2019 the registration centre at Endabaguna held 1,802 Eritreans, exceeding the centre's capacity more than three times over. Eritreans usually stay at Endabaguna for 3–4 days before they are moved to one of the four refugee camps in the Tigray Region. Unaccompanied minors spend more time at Endabaguna at a reception centre designated

²⁸⁹ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁹⁰ Ethiopian authority 14.5.2019.

²⁹¹ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁹² International organisation operating in Ethiopia 17.5.2019.

²⁹³ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁹⁴ At the Fatsi collection point, Eritreans are first asked to show a nationality ID, a School ID, or a residence ID to verify their identity. Some Eritreans have a School ID, birth certificate or vaccination card. Anyone who has no documents whatsoever is asked questions about their place of residence or origin in Eritrea. If a person is suspected to be from Ethiopia, the collection point can send a statement to Endabaguna where nationality is determined. The Fatsi collection point prepares such statements on no more than in 2–3 persons per year. Hardly any Ethiopians pretend to be Eritreans in Ethiopia; according to the source, this mostly occurs outside Ethiopia. (Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.)

²⁹⁵ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

for them before being transferred to refugee camps. In an ideal situation, unaccompanied minors spend two weeks at Endabaguna, during which they are taught skills and knowledge they will need while residing at refugee camps. However, the inadequate number of shelters at refugee camps means that unaccompanied minors may spend up to three weeks at the reception centre.²⁹⁶ According to one source, some children may still reside at Endabaguna three months after arrival due to the lack of shelters.²⁹⁷ In the middle of May 2019, 340 of the 1,802 Eritreans at Endabaguna were unaccompanied minors, who stayed at a guarded reception centre for unaccompanied minors.²⁹⁸

Eritreans who are Afar people in terms of their ethnicity²⁹⁹ are registered in the Afar Region in Ethiopia and placed at two refugee camps³⁰⁰ located in Afar. The Fatsi reception centre, for example, receives (in addition to ethnic Tigrinya and Saho people) ethnic Afar people who are moved to Afar for registration and to live at camps.³⁰¹ Eritreans cross the border into Ethiopia in Tigray and also in the Afar Region. The Afar people are a cross-border community, and the Afar people living in Eritrean have the same language and culture as those living in Ethiopia and Djibouti. Nomadic Afar communities move within the Afar Region but hardly ever outside that area. According to an anonymous source, Afar people arriving from Eritrea to Ethiopia do not continue their journey from Ethiopia to the same extent as other Eritreans, unless they leave through the family reunification process. The source says that the Afar Region does not provide the same kind of access to information, connections or smuggling networks as the Tigray Region; due to the lack of information, Afar people are not as interested in leaving Ethiopia.³⁰²

4.2 Eritrean refugees at refugee camps

4.2.1 Refugee camps in Tigray

The Tigray Region has four refugee camps, Shimelba, Adi-Harush, Mai-Aini, and Hitsats, where registered Eritrean refugees are moved from the registration centre at Endabaguna.³⁰³ The camps are situated near border regions, and town closest to them is called Shire.³⁰⁴ The number of people at refugee camps is in a constant state of flux, as new individuals arrive at camps and others leave through family reunification, for instance. The number of refugees at the camps in Tigray was on the increase in May 2019.³⁰⁵ The total number of people at camps grows every year, so more individuals stay at camps than leave them. The number of people at camps has increased especially due to the rising number of Eritrean children

²⁹⁶ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁹⁷ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

²⁹⁸ Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

²⁹⁹ Eritrea has nine recognised ethnic groups: Tigrinya, Tigre, Afar, Saho, Rashaida, Hedareb, Nara, and Kunama. (EASO 2015, pp. 13–14.)

³⁰⁰ The refugee camps in Afar are called Aysaita and Berhale. (Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.)

³⁰¹ Ethiopian authority 15.5.2019.

³⁰² Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁰³ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁰⁴ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁰⁵ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

arriving in Ethiopia.³⁰⁶ In May 2019, a total of 50,000 refugees accepted food aid at refugee camps in Tigray.³⁰⁷

Although the number of Eritreans living at refugee camps has grown, resources available for maintaining the camps have not increased from before. The refugee camps in Tigray have various challenges in operation and a shortage of basic commodities. The inadequate number of shelters intended for refugee is a critical problem. Some residential buildings designed for 4–5 individuals house 10 persons.³⁰⁸ The camps need more shelters and food.³⁰⁹ Shortage of water and inadequate sanitation and hygiene conditions are critical problems at all camps.³¹⁰ Availability of energy is another challenge that the camps face.³¹¹

Children are able to go to school at the refugee camps in Tigray. Many Eritrean children have been absent from school during their journey to Ethiopia. They can attend catch up classes where they are able to catch up with other pupils in their own age group.³¹² Camps provide refugees with vocational training³¹³ in different sectors and try to create job opportunities within the camps.³¹⁴ However, such possibilities at camps are limited.³¹⁵

According to an Eritrean man who has lived at the Mai-Aini refugee camp for four years, life at the camp is hard and his family mostly lives on assistance. All the man's children go to school, and school began immediately when the family arrived at the camp. The man and his wife managed to find jobs at the camp. He worked as a guard at a communal kitchen at some point and his wife in the children's canteen, but those jobs ended.³¹⁶

4.2.2 Unaccompanied minors at refugee camps

Refugee camps in Tigray have hundreds of children who have come there alone, without an adult custodian. Unaccompanied minors need care and attention, support and safe childcare arrangements.³¹⁷ Camps aim to provide unaccompanied children with different childcare and living arrangements, such as foster families and communal care.³¹⁸ Eritrean families are encouraged to take care of solitary children by providing them with financial support to the extent possible, but resources for cash support for families are limited. In a family environment, children are more likely to go to school³¹⁹ and are less exposed to various risks.³²⁰ However, arranging care and attention for unaccompanied children is extremely difficult. Most inhabitants at the camps in Tigray are young men and people who

³⁰⁶ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁰⁷ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³⁰⁸ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁰⁹ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³¹¹ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹² International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹³ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹⁴ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹⁵ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹⁶ Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

³¹⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³¹⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source B 13.5.2019; Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³¹⁹ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³²⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

intend to move on from there. They are not the target group in the search for potential foster families for children.³²¹

Therefore, many children are placed in communal care,³²² which is no match for a family environment.³²³ Sometimes 10–11 children may live in crowded shelters, and the confined living conditions expose children to different situations. In communal care, it is difficult to satisfy even the basic needs of children, such as clothing or soap. Due to such deficiencies, children may become victims of violations and abuse.³²⁴ Children may be confronted with many risks when they have no adult looking after them. Without a custodian, children are even more exposed to human smugglers and traffickers operating at camps. Unaccompanied children living at refugee camps in Tigray have psychosocial problems, but the resources for treating them are inadequate: providing children with even basic commodities such as food and shelter depletes the resources available.³²⁵

4.3 Leaving refugee camps

4.3.1 Pass permit and Out of Camp status

In Tigray, Eritrean refugees must live at a refugee camp for at least 45 days before they can apply for permission to leave the camp. After 45 days, Eritrean refugees have the right to apply for a *pass permit* and an *Out of Camp status* from the Ethiopian immigration authority.³²⁶ Applications for these can be submitted to offices of the Ethiopian immigration authority at refugee camps. People in need of special support, such as the disabled, the elderly or those with medical conditions, do not have to wait for 45 days before being allowed to leave a camp.³²⁷

A *pass permit* is a short-term permit that gives refugees permission to leave a refugee camp temporarily, for a certain period of time, after which they must return to the refugee camp.³²⁸ The Ethiopian authority says that the pass permit is in effect for two months.³²⁹ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the validity of the pass permit depends on the duration of the period for which the permit is applied.³³⁰ According to an anonymous source, the validity of the pass permit depends on the grounds stated in the application for the permit.³³¹ Grounds for an application for a pass permit can be a meeting at an Embassy, the visa process, a family visit, or *Out of Camp Policy*.³³²

Eritrean refugees living at refugee camps in Ethiopia can apply for an *Out of Camp status*, which gives a refugee the right to reside outside the refugee camp.³³³ According to

³²¹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³²² Anonymous source B 13.5.2019; Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³²³ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³²⁴ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³²⁵ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³²⁶ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³²⁷ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³²⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³²⁹ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³³⁰ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³³¹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³³² Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³³³ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

information provided by an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the *Out of Camp Policy* (OCP) only applies to Eritrean refugees until further notice.³³⁴ A mandatory condition for the granting of OCP status is that the refugee has a sponsor outside the camp who can pay for the refugee's living expenses outside the camp.³³⁵ The legal requirement is that the sponsor must be a citizen of Ethiopia or a foreign national with a residence permit in Ethiopia. The sponsor can be, e.g. an Ethiopian relative or an Eritrean with an Ethiopian residence permit card.³³⁶ In an application for the OCP status, the refugee assures by their signature that they have a sponsor; upon receiving the status, the refugee relinquishes all services at refugee camps.³³⁷ In 2018, approximately 11,000 took the opportunity to obtain OCP status.³³⁸

4.3.2 Onward movement from refugee camps

People leave refugee camps in Tigray all the time.³³⁹ Eritreans leave camps without permission,³⁴⁰ and many Eritreans do not return to camps after the expiry of their pass permit.³⁴¹ The camps are not closed, and migration of Eritreans elsewhere from camps cannot be controlled. Camps try to provide refugees with as much information as possible about, e.g. legal means of family reunification and risks en route to Europe, so refugees can make decisions based on information.³⁴²

According to an anonymous source, there is no statistical data of how long Eritreans stay at refugee camps, on average, before they move on. The source says that, in 2018, the Eritreans who intended to leave a camp left during their first year at the camp. This means that they move on fairly quickly.³⁴³ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, at some camps Eritreans tend to stay for a year on average; at others, only for an average of three to six months before moving on.³⁴⁴

An international NGO operating in Ethiopia does not know where Eritreans go after leaving the camps. The organisation believes that some may settle to live somewhere in Ethiopia, while others may proceed to routes used by immigrants.³⁴⁵ An anonymous source says, there are approximately 20 000 Eritreans missing from the refugee camps in Tigray whose whereabouts are unknown. On the basis of information heard by the source, they are in Addis Ababa, because that is where the embassies which handle the family reunification process are located (see 4.5.). According to the source, these may be people who do not bother to go through the OCP process or who have no relatives in Ethiopia, and are thus unable to obtain OCP status.³⁴⁶

Human smugglers have access to refugee camps in Tigray, and information distributed by smugglers is available at camps. Some people also distribute misinformation at camps. For

³³⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³³⁵ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019; Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³³⁶ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³³⁷ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³³⁸ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³³⁹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁴⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁴¹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁴² Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁴³ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁴⁴ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁴⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁴⁶ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

instance, after the signing of the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Eritrean refugees disseminated a large amount of inaccurate information about the closing of refugee camps and the return of Eritreans to their home country. The purpose of this misinformation was to convince Eritrean refugees that they should set off with the smuggler as soon as possible, because this might become impossible later on. Refugee camps are unable to control the availability of information distributed by human smugglers.³⁴⁷

According to an international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia, up to 90 per cent of the Eritreans crossing the border to Ethiopia intend to move on from Ethiopia.³⁴⁸ In May 2019, the main route used by Eritrean refugees was the northern route to Europe through Sudan and Libya.³⁴⁹ However, Eritrean refugees are increasingly aware of the dangers in Libya.³⁵⁰ Due to the situations in Libya and Sudan, Eritreans use other routes also,³⁵¹ such as the southern route to South Africa through Kenya and Uganda, and the route across the Red Sea to Yemen and Saudi Arabia.³⁵² According to an anonymous source, some Eritreans use new routes through Turkey all the way to South and North America.³⁵³ Eritreans pay for their journey by selling their property in Eritrea and with remittances sent by relatives.³⁵⁴

Eritrean children leave refugee camps, and an international NGO operating in Ethiopia does not know where they go or what happens to them.³⁵⁵ According to an anonymous source, unaccompanied Eritrean minors arriving in Ethiopia are not completely certain what they will do, and in such circumstances young people are exposed to smugglers. The same source says that in spring 2018 Eritrean children at refugee camps in Tigray were still ready to take the risk and travel along the route through Libya. However, in January and February 2019 refugees were repeatedly heard to be under the impression that the Libyan route was closed. The source has become aware that since the Libyan route became more challenging, more Eritrean children have left Ethiopia for Nairobi in Kenya and Kampala in Uganda. According to the source, this signifies some degree of movement to the south, though not many people are moving that way.³⁵⁶

According to an anonymous source, Eritrean refugees, if given the chance, would consistently prefer regular to irregular migration. Regular migration is an option that is cheaper and, in the long term, better for them. Leaving a refugee camp is not easy because it is a risky move that costs money, and arranging the travel requires new contacts with smuggling networks, for instance.³⁵⁷

³⁴⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁴⁸ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁴⁹ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁵⁰ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁵¹ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019; Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁵² Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁵³ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁵⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁵⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁵⁶ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁵⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

4.4 Eritreans outside refugee camps

4.4.1 Legal and illegal residence outside refugee camps

According to an Ethiopian authority, Eritrean refugees reside outside refugee camps in Ethiopia both legally and illegally. Eritrean refugees who have been granted an *Out of Camp status* have legal permission to live outside refugee camps. Also, Eritrean refugees with a valid, short-term *pass permit* that allows them to temporarily leave the refugee camp reside outside camps on a legal basis. Eritrean refugees who leave refugee camps without permission reside outside camps illegally. Likewise, Eritrean refugees who do not return to a refugee camp after the expiry of the temporary pass permit live unlawfully outside refugee camps. Ethiopian authorities are aware of the Eritreans who have been granted an *Out of Camp status*. They do not know, however, how many Eritreans with a temporary pass permit have not returned to a refugee camp.³⁵⁸

Not all Eritreans who cross the border to Ethiopia register as a refugee³⁵⁹ in Ethiopia or go to a refugee camp³⁶⁰. The interviewed sources do not know the number of Eritreans who cross the border but are not registered as refugees in Ethiopia.³⁶¹ According to an anonymous source, border checkpoints in Ethiopia do not use systematic registration that could be used for compiling statistical data. The source says that soldiers record basic information about who has crossed the border and when, but the details are not entered into any system that would produce statistics.³⁶² An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia presumes that the majority of Eritreans want to move elsewhere from Ethiopia, so it is in their best interest to register as a refugee. According to the same organisation, Eritreans with business interests in Ethiopia have no incentive for registering as a refugee.³⁶³

It is not known how many Eritreans live in Ethiopia or the Tigray Region without a refugee status. According to the anonymous source, in May 2019 Ethiopia did not require Eritreans to register themselves or acquire a residence permit for being able to live in Ethiopia.³⁶⁴ According to the Ethiopian authority, Eritrean refugees who have left refugee camps illegally live in cities in the Tigray Region and in Addis Ababa, as do many Eritreans who arrived in Ethiopia after the border was opened, but Ethiopia does not require them to go back to Eritrea.³⁶⁵ According to an anonymous source, the number of Eritreans living outside refugee camps in Ethiopia has increased significantly.³⁶⁶

4.4.2 Possibilities for subsistence and education

An Ethiopian authority interviewed says that Ethiopia has approved a new Refugees Proclamation concerning the ability of refugees to work in Ethiopia.³⁶⁷ According to an official press release by the UNHCR, the Parliament of Ethiopia passed amendments to the

³⁵⁸ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁵⁹ International organisation 29.4.2019.

³⁶⁰ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁶¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source C 16.5.2019; Interview with anonymous experts 13.5.2019.

³⁶² Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁶³ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁶⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

³⁶⁵ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁶⁶ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁶⁷ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

Refugees Proclamation on 17 January 2019. The new Act (Proclamation No. 1110/2019: Refugees Proclamation³⁶⁸) replaces the previous Refugee Proclamation from 2004. The UNHCR's bulletin says that the new Refugee Proclamation allows refugees to acquire a work permit, and gives them access to education, a driving licence, legal registration of life events (see 4.4.3.), and banking services.³⁶⁹

The Ethiopian authority says that the new Refugees Proclamation gives refugees the right to work in Ethiopia, with the exception of professions in the security sector and the political field. Adoption of the Proclamation was still at the preparatory phase in May 2019. According to the authority, in May 2019 some of the rights provided in the Proclamation had already commenced, such as refugees' right to a driving licence, bank account, and telecommunication.³⁷⁰

In the view of an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the amendment made to the Refugees Proclamation slightly expands the right of refugees to work in Ethiopia. According to the organisation, the Proclamation was not in force yet in May 2019, and it had not been enforced. Thus it is unclear for the organisation how the Proclamation will be interpreted or applied in practice. In the organisation's view, the new Proclamation means that refugees will be treated in the most favourable way possible, as foreign nationals, in Ethiopia. According to the organisation, foreign nationals' right to employment in Ethiopia is, in general, very limited. For instance, they must prove that the professional skills they have are not available in Ethiopia, and foreign employees are completely excluded from many sectors.³⁷¹

According to the Ethiopian authority, Eritreans who live legally outside refugee camps in Ethiopia have an official permit for employment.³⁷² According to human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia, refugees in Ethiopia are entitled to employment, education and health care, but the practical implementation of these rights is problematic because there are so many refugees in Ethiopia.³⁷³ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, an *Out of Camp* status, by itself, does not give a refugee a right to employment. The organisation finds it problematic that OCP refugees relinquish all services offered at refugee camps but have no permission to work. The organisation is concerned about the ability for employment of Eritreans who leave refugee camps with the OCP status, when they live outside camps.³⁷⁴

According to the Ethiopian authority, Eritreans who live legally outside refugee camps in Ethiopia have an official permit to go to school.³⁷⁵ According to an anonymous source, registered Eritrean children can continue to go to school in Tigray, and many Eritreans can continue their education at universities in Ethiopia and in Tigray, such as the universities of Adigrat and Aksum.³⁷⁶ Another anonymous source says that there are children from Eritrea in the Tigray Region who do not reside in Ethiopia officially, but who live with their relatives and

³⁶⁸ [Federal Negarit Gazette of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 27.2.2019.](#)

³⁶⁹ UNHCR 18.1.2019.

³⁷⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁷¹ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³⁷² Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁷³ Human rights organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁷⁴ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³⁷⁵ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁷⁶ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

go to school.³⁷⁷ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritrean children can receive education at public schools in Ethiopia if there is room for them. They can go to primary school, in particular, for free. Students have to pay for higher education at colleges and universities or obtain funding for it.³⁷⁸ According to an anonymous source, refugees can go to Ethiopian universities and complete university degrees. Students can have access to tertiary education by means of scholarships.³⁷⁹

According to the international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans living outside refugee camps in Ethiopia are largely dependent on remittances sent by their families and support from the community. They are employed in the unofficial sector, typically doing work that can be done in people's homes.³⁸⁰ According to the Ethiopian authority, Eritreans residing in Addis Ababa and in towns in Tigray may live with relatives, subsist on their own, or engage in trading.³⁸¹

According to an international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans stay to reside in Ethiopia primarily for two reasons, family ties and business operations.³⁸² Many Eritrean refugees have married an Ethiopian, and marriages between Eritreans and Ethiopians are commonplace.³⁸³ Eritreans establish companies and carry out small-scale business and agriculture in Ethiopia. According to an international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans who have taken up residence in Ethiopia have connections, family ties and support, and they make a living like other Ethiopians. However, Ethiopia has a high unemployment rate, and Eritreans are not in the best possible position in the labour market.³⁸⁴

4.4.3 Registration of life events

According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, the law in Ethiopia enables refugees to receive certificates of key life events. Certificates of birth, marriage and death are issued by the *Vital Events Registration Agency* (VERA). VERA does not operate at refugee camps, but it does operate at least in towns in the Tigray Region. According to the organisation, refugees are, in theory, able to obtain certificates through VERA in the same way as Ethiopians. However, refugees have practical challenges with receiving certificates. In more complicated cases, such as in the event of a divorce, a court order may sometimes be required, but refugees face many obstacles with access to court system. In the case of a birth certificate, there are certain requirements that must be met before a certificate is issued. A baby must be born at a health post so the baby can be issued with a *birth notification* required for the registration of the birth. Women who give birth at home find it more difficult to obtain a *birth notification*, without which the birth cannot be registered. Refugee camps have health posts, but refugees who cannot make it there in time to deliver the baby have a challenge with obtaining a birth notification.³⁸⁵

³⁷⁷ Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

³⁷⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁷⁹ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019.

³⁸⁰ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁸¹ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁸² International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁸³ International organisation operating in Ethiopia 17.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁸⁴ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁸⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

4.4.4 Eritreans in the Tigray Region

In Tigray, individuals living on both the Ethiopian and Eritrean side of the border belong to the same people³⁸⁶ and speak the same language³⁸⁷. Thus Eritreans can easily adapt to life in the Tigray Region. According to a rumour heard by an anonymous source, the number of Eritreans living in towns in Tigray may be as high as the figure of Eritreans at refugee camps in Tigray. According to the same source, Eritreans settle in urban areas in Tigray. The source supposes that some of them may apply for a university or settle down and start a business.³⁸⁸

According to an anonymous source, there is no confrontation between the refugee community and the local community in Tigray. Since Eritrean refugees live mostly at refugee camps, there is no competition for resources between refugees and local communities in Tigray. Generally speaking, local people have a positive attitude towards Eritrean refugees in Tigray.³⁸⁹ However, according to the Ethiopian authority, refugees chop wood due to the scarcity of resources at refugee camps in Tigray, and this leads to conflicts with local communities.³⁹⁰

An international humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia is unaware of any problems between refugees and local communities in Tigray. In the organisation's assessment, people from Tigray who live in various parts of Ethiopia are returning to the Tigray Region because of ethnic violence spreading in Ethiopia, so the population of Tigray is on the rise. According to the organisation, this may cause competition between refugees and the local community in the future.³⁹¹ According to an international organisation, there is some kind of unrest in the Tigray Region, since people in the area have not accepted the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.³⁹²

4.4.5 Eritreans in Addis Ababa

Most Ethiopians have a positive attitude towards refugees from Eritrea. Many Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia end up in Addis Ababa. According to a rumour heard by an anonymous source, there may be 50,000–100,000 Eritreans living in Addis Ababa. Some Eritreans have trouble adapting to life in Addis Ababa because they do not speak Amharic³⁹³. Eritreans residing in Addis Ababa go and live among people who speak Tigrinya.³⁹⁴ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, most Eritreans in Addis Ababa live in the districts of Bole, Yeka, and Nifas Silk. Eritreans live in three major clusters situated at Mebrat Hail, Jomo, and 22-Megenagna.³⁹⁵ According to an anonymous source, many Eritreans reside in the

³⁸⁶ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁸⁷ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁸⁸ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁸⁹ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁹⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

³⁹¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁹² International organisation 29.4.2019.

³⁹³ The official language of Ethiopia.

³⁹⁴ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁹⁵ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

areas of CMC and Hayahulet in Addis Ababa.³⁹⁶ The area called CMC is located in the district of Bole.³⁹⁷

According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, there are two kinds of Eritrean refugees at cities in Ethiopia. Urban, assisted refugees who leave refugee camps for reasons related to protection or health or other matters receive assistance from operators that support refugees. Eritrean refugees who are registered with the *Out of Camp* status do not receive any assistance.³⁹⁸

According to the international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans arriving in Addis Ababa are mostly dependent on remittances sent by their family members, friends, and acquaintances living in foreign countries. The organisation says that most Eritrean refugees who leave refugee camps to reside in cities, especially in Addis Ababa, do not know city life or the rules of the *Out of Camp Policy*. They presume that cities have enough opportunities for work and business, but their expectations do not match reality. Eritrean refugees who are not entitled to official assistance are usually given financial aid for small businesses offered by a few organisations. According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritreans try to start businesses they can run at home, because operating on commercial premises requires a business licence to which they are not entitled. Some try to launch unofficial business activities with support received from humanitarian organisations.³⁹⁹

4.5 Family reunification

Many underage and adult Eritreans travel to Ethiopia due to family reunification or relatives living abroad.⁴⁰⁰ According to information provided by an anonymous source in May 2019, 60 per cent of the Eritreans who had arrived in Ethiopia during the preceding six months had one or several relatives in Ethiopia or some other country.⁴⁰¹ Many Eritreans interviewed who had crossed the border to Ethiopia in spring 2019 said that they had relatives in Ethiopia or Europe.⁴⁰² Some had followed their relatives who had arrived in Ethiopia earlier, and others were planning to make their way to relatives living abroad.⁴⁰³

Refugee camps in Tigray do not offer consular services which, according to the anonymous source, forces Eritreans seeking family reunification to spend almost a month in Addis Ababa, where the embassies are located. According to the same source, the major challenges for Eritreans trying to reunify their families is access to embassies and living in Addis Ababa. Life in Addis Ababa is extremely expensive. A rented room alone can cost 2,000–3,000 Ethiopian

³⁹⁶ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

³⁹⁷ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁹⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

³⁹⁹ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴⁰⁰ Ethiopian authority 13.5.2019.

⁴⁰¹ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁴⁰² Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia B 14.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴⁰³ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

*birrs*⁴⁰⁴ per month. According to the source, only Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia alone can afford to go to Addis Ababa. Eritreans with special needs, unaccompanied and separated children, large families headed by women, or solitary women trying to join their spouses are not necessarily able to live in the city. According to information received by the source, many Eritrean refugees do not show up at family reunification interviews held at embassies.⁴⁰⁵

Refugees need a pass permit (see 4.3.1.) from the refugee camp to be able to travel to Addis Ababa for the purpose of the family reunification process.⁴⁰⁶ Eritreans leave refugee camps on their own and head to Addis Ababa, where they try to enter embassies to find a way to reunite with their family members.⁴⁰⁷ According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritrean refugees usually travel from Tigray to Addis Ababa by bus.⁴⁰⁸ The city closest to the refugee camps is called Shire, where most public means of transport are available. According to an anonymous source, Eritreans can use public transport and move relatively freely within Ethiopia after arriving in the country.⁴⁰⁹

Even unaccompanied and separated children usually travel to Addis Ababa during the family reunification process. Minors need a pass permit and a guardian to go to Addis Ababa for a certain period of time. Child's relatives abroad usually arrange the journey and the guardian. The Eritrean diaspora around the world and the Eritrean community in Ethiopia are both large, and the community can usually find a relative, friend or neighbour to support a child. In cases where an unaccompanied child does not have anyone to help him/her reach Addis Ababa, the child may obtain support from a party operating at refugee camps. Many Eritrean children do not return to camps from Addis Ababa.⁴¹⁰

Of the unaccompanied Eritrean minors interviewed who had crossed the border to Ethiopia in the spring of 2019, the majority had relatives abroad, and many wanted to travel to Addis Ababa and proceed elsewhere from the city.⁴¹¹ According to an anonymous source, minors who go to Addis Ababa without the information required to cope there are exposed to risks in the city.⁴¹² According to an international NGO operating in Ethiopia, Eritrean children leave refugee camps and the organisation does not know where they go or what happens to them.⁴¹³

Family reunification is a private process between refugees and the State in which other parties, as a rule, do not intervene. Eritreans who are registered as refugees in Ethiopia and who have appropriate documents can usually complete the family reunification process without any support or intervention from other parties.⁴¹⁴ However, in cases of family reunification that involve minors or illness, assistance can be obtained from operators that support refugees.⁴¹⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Approximately EUR 61–91. (XE Currency Converter 6.11.2019.)

⁴⁰⁵ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁴⁰⁶ International organisation operating in Ethiopia 17.5.2019.

⁴⁰⁷ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁴⁰⁸ International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

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⁴¹⁴ Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

⁴¹⁵ International organisation operating in Ethiopia 17.5.2019; Anonymous source B 13.5.2019.

4.6 Communication to Eritrea

4.6.1 Possibilities for communication between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Before the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the telephone connection between the two countries was shut down.⁴¹⁶ The telephone connection between the two countries was opened after the peace agreement was signed, and it remained open in May 2019.⁴¹⁷ People can keep in contact between Ethiopia and Eritrea by phone,⁴¹⁸ but it is expensive⁴¹⁹.

According to organisations operating in Ethiopia, some Eritreans at refugee camps in Tigray, though not all of them, have a mobile phone and access to the Internet and social media.⁴²⁰ The refugees who have access to these communication channels distribute information to others at camps.⁴²¹ In the estimate of an international organisation operating in Ethiopia, 80 per cent of Eritreans have a mobile phone at a refugee camp. They also have access to the Internet and social media.⁴²² Most urban refugees in Addis Ababa are able to use a mobile phone and social media.⁴²³

Refugee camps in Tigray and the registration centre at Endabaguna provide a free phone service Eritrean refugees can use to call their family members. The service is open to all refugees, but phone conversations are monitored because the service is only intended for contact with family members. Many Eritreans at camps do not need a phone service, however, because they have other ways to make phone calls.⁴²⁴

Some of the Eritrean interviewees who had arrived in Ethiopia said that they keep in contact with relatives in Eritrea by phone.⁴²⁵ According to an Eritrean family living at the Mai-Aini refugee camp, the camp has a telephone they sometimes use to maintain contact with siblings residing in Eritrea.⁴²⁶ An Eritrean woman living at the same camp said that she keeps in contact with her parents using phone.⁴²⁷ Of the unaccompanied Eritrean minors interviewed, some used their own phones and other the telephone service at Endabaguna to maintain contact with their families. One minor said that the Internet connection at

⁴¹⁶ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴¹⁷ International organisation operating in Ethiopia 17.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴¹⁸ Anonymous source A 17.5.2019; Anonymous source C 16.5.2019; International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴¹⁹ Anonymous source C 16.5.2019.

⁴²⁰ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; International NGO operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴²¹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

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⁴²⁴ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴²⁵ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019; Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019; Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴²⁶ Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴²⁷ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

Endabaguna is poor, so they use social media only to a small extent.⁴²⁸ One Eritrean who had crossed to border to Ethiopia in May 2019 was unable to contact family in Eritrea immediately after crossing the border because of the poor quality of the phone connection.⁴²⁹

4.6.2 Telephone network and Internet connection in Eritrea

According to an international organisation, the telephone network in Eritrea is poor and there are dead zones within the country. The phone line is not always good, and sometimes calls do not go through. According to the organisation, Eritreans must apply for a SIM card through a certain application procedure, and cards are hard to obtain. Furthermore, SIM cards are relatively expensive in Eritrea. The organisation says that there are telephone kiosks on the streets that sell phone cards. An Eritrean phone subscription can be used to call abroad from Eritrea, but international calls are expensive. According to the organisation, cases of recording of international calls have been observed in Eritrea.⁴³⁰

According to the international organisation, many Eritreans place calls to relatives living abroad through Facebook Messenger, but the connection is poor. The organisation says that WhatsApp calls may sometimes go through, but video calls do not. The organisation says that Eritrean SIM cards do not have a mobile Internet connection. According to the organisation, the official figures on Internet coverage are minimal. At maximum, roughly two per cent of the population has an Internet connection. Coverage is focused on Asmara and possibly, to some extent, on Massawa, but few people elsewhere in the country have access to the Internet. According to the organisation, Internet cafés have some kind of a connection, but it is inadequate for playing videos, for example. The organisation says that there are people standing close to Internet cafés who have probably hacked into their network and use the Internet for free. According to the international organisation, the Eritrean government monitors but does not censor the use of the Internet. People have fairly free access to the Web, but Eritreans are careful about what they communicate through Facebook, for instance.⁴³¹

4.6.3 Possibilities for communication during National Service

According to the international organisation, most Eritreans who do their National Service have a mobile phone. However, the organisation does not know how much mobile phones can be used during National Service.⁴³²

According to an international organisation, few people are granted leave from National Service to go home for a visit. Several months, or sometimes a year, may pass before a person can go on leave.⁴³³ According to an Eritrean male who had been in National Service for 18 years, soldiers were allowed to meet with their family approximately once a year. The man himself received leave due to his health and the treatment he needed.⁴³⁴ Another Eritrean male interviewee, who had been ordered to do his National Service in Assab, said

⁴²⁸ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴²⁹ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

⁴³⁰ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³¹ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³² International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³³ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³⁴ Interview with an Eritrean family in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

that he was not allowed to go on home leave for three years. He said that he was permitted to send and receive letters while he served as a soldier in Assab.⁴³⁵ An Eritrean female interviewee, who was doing military service in Asmara, was allowed to visit her family living nearby once a month, overnight.⁴³⁶

According to information heard by the international organisation, one father had not seen his son, who was about to be released from military service, during the past year. The son had lost a lot of weight during his National Service. According to the organisation, food in the army is of poor quality, and some families manage to send food to the place of service.⁴³⁷

According to the international organisation, not all women in Eritrea are exempted from National Service; instead, several females are ordered to do National Service like men. Family relations or the place of residence have no influence on where a person is sent. People are assigned to National Service arbitrarily, far away from their family, so family members are forcibly separated from one another. Moving in Eritrea is slow, and few people can afford their own car. Siblings or grandparents may look after smaller children while the parents are in National Service. In the case of teachers, the various language groups in Eritrea affect the place where they are assigned, because teachers cannot be placed in the area of an ethnic groups whose language they do not speak.⁴³⁸

4.6.4 Tracing of family members

People living at refugee camps and the registration centre in Tigray can obtain help with tracing their family members.⁴³⁹ Especially vulnerable individuals, such as unaccompanied minors, are provided with a service for tracing their family members, so they can be reconnected with their family members in Eritrea or in another country. In many cases, Eritreans do not tell anyone that they are about to leave the country, so the service offers them a chance to let their family know that they have managed to cross the border safely. Family members of refugees are traced on the basis of information the refugees provide. However, the possibilities for tracing family members in Eritrea are very limited.⁴⁴⁰ Of the unaccompanied Eritrean children who were interviewed, some had been able to contact their family through the family tracing service.⁴⁴¹

Unaccompanied underage Eritreans can also receive help for tracing relatives living at refugee camps or elsewhere in Ethiopia. If relatives living at a camp can be traced, the child and the relatives are brought together at the refugee camp. If tracing of relatives living outside refugee camps is successful, sometimes the child's relatives pay their own way to the camp where they are given information about the guardianship process. However, travelling costs money, so going to a refugee camp can be a challenge for some relatives with inadequate funds.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁵ Group interview with Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴³⁶ Group interview with Eritrean asylum seekers in Tigray, Ethiopia A 15.5.2019.

⁴³⁷ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³⁸ International organisation 7.5.2019.

⁴³⁹ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019; Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

⁴⁴⁰ International humanitarian organisation operating in Ethiopia 16.5.2019.

⁴⁴¹ Group interview with unaccompanied underage Eritrean refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia 13.5.2019.

⁴⁴² Anonymous source D 13.5.2019.

There is a website on the Internet that Eritreans can use to search for their relatives among photographs published on the site, and make contact with them. Eritreans registered as refugees in Ethiopia, who hope to re-establish contact with their family members, can publish their own photo on the site if they wish. A photo can only be published with the consent of the refugee. Photos of those who have given their consent are on the website for everyone to see, but information about identity is not public. It is possible that Eritrean authorities become aware that a person has left and crossed the border through photographs listed on the site. Usually Eritreans who have problems with the authorities do not give their consent to publish their photo on the Web, because they know that this information can fall into the hands of the Eritrean authorities.⁴⁴³

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