

International

Thousands of Eritrean refugees caught in crossfire of Tigray war

Information vacuum spurs dire speculation over refugees' fate in camps

MAI AINI REFUGEE CAMP, Ethiopia: They have survived gun battles, attempted abductions, attacks by angry militiamen and days-long treks to safety with nothing to eat but moringa leaves.

Yet Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia fear their suffering may not be over, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed strains to end a brutal conflict in the northern region of Tigray that has rendered them uniquely vulnerable. Nearly 100,000 refugees from Eritrea, an oppressive, authoritarian nation bordering Ethiopia to the north, were registered in four camps in Tigray when fighting erupted in November between Abiy's government and the regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Two of those camps, Hitsats and Shimelba, were caught up in hostilities and remain inaccessible to the United Nations refugee agency and its Ethiopian counterpart, the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA). The information vacuum has spurred dire speculation over the refugees' fate.

The UN has sounded the alarm over reported targeted killings and abductions by Eritrean soldiers, whose role in the conflict is widely documented but officially denied by Addis Ababa and Asmara.

The US State Department last week cited "credible reports" of looting and sexual violence in the camps. On his first trip to Ethiopia since the conflict began, UN refugees chief Filippo Grandi over the weekend visited Mai Aini, one of two camps in southern Tigray where the UN has regained access.

The camp is now home to hundreds of refugees from Hitsats, some of whom told AFP of the horrors they left behind. "Most of the people, if you search this camp, they'll start crying when they talk about what happened," said Girmay, who like other refugees insisted on using only one name, fearing reprisals. "Our friends could be alive or dead. We don't know."

'They came and killed'

The TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics for almost three decades—it was in power when Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a border war that killed tens of thou-

sands between 1998 and 2000 and led to a two-decade stalemate. After taking office in 2018, Abiy initiated a surprise rapprochement with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, a move that won him the Nobel Peace Prize the following year.

Yet Isaias and the TPLF—whose region borders Eritrea—remain bitter enemies, heightening the risks for Eritrean refugees caught up in the conflict. Once fighting reached Hitsats in late November, pro-TPLF militiamen targeted refugees in reprisal killings after suffering battlefield setbacks against Eritrean troops, several refugees told AFP. On one morning the militiamen shot dead nine young Eritrean men outside a church, they said.

Pro-TPLF forces based themselves out of Hitsats for weeks, forbidding hungry residents from going out in search of food and shooting dead several who tried anyway. "At first we couldn't believe it because they speak the same language as us," Girmay said of the pro-TPLF forces.

"Before we are friends... Suddenly they came and killed." Eritrean soldiers also committed abuses, the refugees said, arresting dozens of people, likely more, and whisking them to an unknown destination.

"The Eritrean soldiers caught some people and started asking them questions. I've counted 26 or 27," one refugee said. "The next day they took them somewhere else. We don't know where they are."

Many refugees fled Eritrea to avoid its notorious system of compulsory national service, which inspires descriptions of the nation as an "open-air prison", and among their greatest fears is to be forced back. Ethiopia's government is investigating abuses and will try to account for all of Hitsats' pre-conflict population, which it estimates at around 11,000, said Tesfahun Gobeze, ARRA's executive director. "With regard to Eritrean soldiers taking Eritrean refugees, we don't have any solid evidence yet," Tesfahun said.

'How can I feel safe?'

Eritrean forces assumed control of Hitsats in early January and forced those remaining in the camp to



Ethiopian Army soldiers stand as children stand behind them at Mai Aini Refugee camp, in Ethiopia.— AFP

evacuate, refugees said. "They threatened to kill us and people were afraid," said one refugee now in Addis Ababa, who asked that his name not be used. Roughly 3,000 refugees from Hitsats and the other inaccessible northern camp, Shimelba, have since reached the two camps in southern Tigray, many travelling by foot with no water and only leaves for food. In Mai Aini some new arrivals complained of poor access to clean water and of not having a place to sleep. But their biggest concern, shared by some longtime residents, was for their security, with several worrying that pro-TPLF militias could attack the camp despite an extensive federal military presence nearby. "How can I feel safe here?" said Natnael, who has lived in Mai Aini since he was a boy. "There are many militias around the camp." ARRA's Tesfahun said progress had been made in re-establishing basic services in the southern camps. He also said the camps were safe, though he added that "security is

more of a feeling than reality, so they may feel that they are still insecure even if the reality shows otherwise."

'Systematically targeted'

It remains to be seen what has become of the two camps in northern Tigray that are still out of contact. Satellite imagery shows widespread damage to both, suggesting a campaign to destroy them, the British-based investigations firm DX Open Network said.

"There are clear and consistent patterns across both camps over a two-month period demonstrating that these refugee camps were systematically targeted despite their protected humanitarian status," it said in a statement. Well before the conflict, Abiy's government made no secret of its goal to get rid of the northern camps and relocate the refugees. Tesfahun said the plan had been "sabotaged" by the TPLF, but that it was now "resuming." — AFP

French police block passengers as new COVID rules kick in

ROISSY-CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT, France: French border police turned away some passengers bound for non-EU destinations yesterday as new rules came into force banning flights to and from countries outside the bloc. Prime Minister Jean Castex announced the measure Friday as part of new efforts to contain COVID-19 infections and avoid another nationwide lockdown.

Travellers must also present proof of a recent negative COVID test. Only urgent reasons for travel are accepted and border police require written proof before allowing passengers to board, as Toure, a Malian national, found out when he tried to leave France for Bamako without the necessary document.

"I said that my mother, whom I hadn't seen in a while, was ill but they told me I needed proof," Toure, who withheld his last name, told AFP in the 2E terminal at Paris's main airport Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle. After being turned away Toure, who works for a French public works foundation, managed to get hold of his mother's doctor in Bamako who sent him a barely legible note by WhatsApp. He tried again, and this time was waved through.



PARIS: Travellers show their documents to a police border officer at the immigration desk of Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle international airport, yesterday as new COVID-19 border restrictions come into effect.— AFP

By curbing international travel, the government hopes to get a better grip on the circulation of the coronavirus and its recent variants, which have been spreading at a fearsome pace. "The idea is to limit the outbound-inbound loops between France and abroad," Julien Gentile, head of the border police for the Roissy and Le Bourget airports, told AFP. Passengers must first show the required documentation at airline counters during check-in, and then again at the border controls, where agents were no longer allowing automated passport scanning but instead checking each document, as passenger queues grew longer.

The time needed per passenger can easily reach five or 10 minutes, compared with just seconds usually, as agents try to determine what is an "urgent" motive and what isn't. "If you want to visit the grave of somebody who didn't die recently you can't go, even if that may seem cruel," said Cecile Aerdeeman, head of the airports' border service. "You will have to wait until the health situation changes." President Emmanuel Macron has decided, for now, not to impose a third national lockdown, choosing a different path than France's neighbors such as Britain and Germany.—AFP



MOSCOW: People talk to riot police willing to pass through during a rally in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow on Sunday.— AFP

Russian prosecutors back request to imprison Navalny

MOSCOW: Russian prosecutors yesterday backed a request to imprison opposition leader Alexei Navalny for several years on old charges, after police detained a record number of anti-Kremlin protesters across the country. On Sunday, demonstrators defied government warnings and rallied from the Pacific port of Vladivostok to the northwestern city of Pskov in a second weekend of mass protest over the arrest of President Vladimir Putin's most prominent opponent.

The protests, which saw authorities enforce an unprecedented lockdown of the center of Moscow, came ahead of a high-profile court hearing that could see Navalny imprisoned for several years.

Navalny's detention and the crackdown on protesters has sparked an outcry in the West. The 44-year-old is facing charges of violating the terms of a 2014 suspended sentence for embezzlement and could be jailed for two-and-a-half years. The General Prosecutor's Office said in a statement yesterday that it backed a request by the prison service to change the suspended sentence to jail time. "This motion is considered lawful and justified," the statement said.

Navalny was detained at a Moscow airport in mid-

Libyan election vow must be honored: UN

GENEVA: Libyan delegates gathered in Geneva yesterday to choose new temporary leaders for the war-scarred country, with the UN stressing the importance of respecting their commitment to hold elections next December. The 75 participants at the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum have until Friday to select a prime minister and a three-member presidency council from a list of 45 candidates. The new leadership will then be tasked with guiding the oil-rich and conflict-ravaged North African country until elections scheduled for December 24.

By picking that date, "you have put an indelible mark on the calendar," acting UN envoy Stephanie Williams told the delegates. "This decision was greeted with the overwhelming approval by your compatriots, and it is a

January after flying back to Russia from Germany where he was recovering from an August poisoning. He blames the attack with the Novichok nerve agent on Putin and the FSB security agency.

Batons and tasers

The anti-corruption campaigner is being held in a high-security detention center and faces years of jail time in several different criminal cases, despite calls from Western governments for his release. Navalny's team has urged his sympathizers to gather in front of Moscow's Simonovskiy district court on Tuesday to show support for the opposition politician.

In recent years, Navalny has served a number of brief jail stints but never a long prison term. On Sunday, thousands of people rallied across Russia to demand freedom for Navalny and changes to Russia's tightly-controlled political system. OVD Info, which monitors arrests at opposition protests, said more than 5,300 people had been detained. Nearly 1,800 people were held in Moscow and almost 1,200 in Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city.

More than 90 journalists were detained, OVD Info said. Ahead of Sunday's demonstration, authorities locked down the center of the capital, with hundreds of police lining the streets, central metro stations closed and restrictions on the movements of pedestrians. Protesters who had hoped to gather outside FSB headquarters were instead scattered to various parts of the city as organizers made last-minute changes in locations.—AFP

commitment that must be honored at all costs," she said.

"The Libyan people are behind you. They support you and they want you to succeed. They need you to succeed. Don't let them down." Libya has been torn by civil war since a NATO-backed uprising led to the ouster and killing of long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The country is now split between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and its rival, the eastern-based House of Representatives backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

A fragile ceasefire agreed in Geneva last October has largely held despite threats by Haftar to resume fighting. The list of candidates unveiled Saturday by the UN includes 21 names for the position of prime minister and 24 for the presidency council. Williams stressed yesterday that the temporary leaders should strive towards national reconciliation and the restoration of democracy. "This project is not about power sharing or dividing the cake," she said. "Rather it is to form a temporary government composed of patriots who agree to shoulder and to share the responsibility to put Libyan sovereignty and the security, prosperity and the welfare of the Libyan people above narrow interests."—AFP

News in brief

Uganda election challenged in court

KAMPALA: Lawyers for Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine filed a challenge in the Supreme Court yesterday against President Yoweri Museveni's victory in last month's election, claiming the poll was rigged. "We want nullification of the election. We do not want (Museveni) participating in any future election," said Medard Sseggon, one of Wine's lawyers, at the Kampala courthouse where he filed the petition for the runner-up in the January 14 presidential election. Museveni, a 76-year-old former rebel leader who has ruled since 1986, won a sixth term in office with 58.6 percent of the vote.—AFP

Bulgarian president to seek second term

SOFIA: Bulgarian President Rumen Radev said yesterday that he would run for a second five-year term of office in presidential elections this autumn. Radev, a 57-year-old former pilot and commander-in-chief of the Bulgarian air force, is a vehement critic of incumbent conservative Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. He has strongly backed months-long street protests against Borisov's outgoing conservative government ahead of parliamentary elections on April 4. "The April parliamentary vote poses to people the dilemma whether to accept or overthrow the current model of power: centered on one man, shady, repressive, corrupt, wasteful and unfair to the ordinary Bulgarian," Radev told a press conference on the four-year anniversary of his taking office.—AFP

Palestinians to launch vaccinations

RAMALLAH: The Palestinians are to receive a first batch of 50,000 coronavirus vaccines by mid-February, when they will launch inoculations in the West Bank and Gaza, their prime minister said yesterday. Speaking ahead of a Palestinian Authority weekly cabinet meeting, Mohammed Shtayyeh said the procurement had been secured through various sources, including the UN-backed Covax program, set up to provide vaccines to less wealthy states. "Vaccination will start in the middle of this month," Shtayyeh said.—AFP



This handout picture made available by the United Nations shows delegates at the opening of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum yesterday at an undisclosed location near Geneva to choose a new temporary executive to lead the war-scarred country through a transition until scheduled December elections.— AFP