

# THE CRISIS BELOW THE HEADLINES

CONFLICT DISPLACEMENT IN ETHIOPIA

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FIELD REPORT | NOVEMBER 2018



Cover Photo: Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled intercommunal violence and were returned prematurely by the Ethiopian government to their home areas now reside in informal, secondary displacement sites where they lack access to sufficient food and clean water, secure shelter, and protection. West Guji, Oromia Region, Ethiopia. (Photo by Refugees International)

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## SUMMARY

Since April 2018, the ascension of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister of Ethiopia has ushered in a wave of national optimism. The new prime minister has moved quickly to open political space, promote human rights, and negotiate peace with neighboring Eritrea. However, behind the positive headlines—and indeed positive measures that merit international support—a major humanitarian crisis has unfolded in the south of the country. Over the past year, intercommunal violence has displaced hundreds of thousands Ethiopians. At the outset of the crisis, Prime Minister Abiy's administration took laudable action in collaborating openly with United Nations agencies and other humanitarian organizations to mobilize and coordinate a response to the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Unfortunately, however, it has more recently taken steps that have compounded IDPs' suffering by pressing for their return home before conditions were suitable.

As political ground shifted at the federal level, long-standing grievances between ethnic groups over land, borders, and rights re-emerged in an explosion of violence in southern Ethiopia. Significant displacement occurred between April and June along the internal border of Oromia and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).

In September, a team from Refugees International (RI) traveled to southern Oromia and SNNPR to assess the situation of the displaced and the response. The team found that while the government made a proactive effort to partner with international humanitarian organizations early on, this positive trend was soon upended. In late August, the government began to restrict the delivery of assistance, telling IDPs that they would only receive help if they returned home. However, because many return areas were destroyed in the violence and remained insecure, a number of IDPs who tried to return home now find themselves living in secondary displacement sites.

The government must take four key steps to address the crisis. First, it must refrain from carrying out additional premature, non-voluntary returns and allow aid organizations to provide assistance in both areas of displacement and areas of return. Second, it must establish a clear and transparent plan for voluntary and sustainable returns. Third, the government should implement this return plan in close coordination with relief organizations. And fourth, it must inform IDPs who have already been returned that they can live where they feel safest and that aid provision will be need-based. Donors and humanitarians must advocate for these changes while working with the government to support an overall improvement in its response to conflict IDPs.

Resolving ethnic disputes will be a long-term endeavor for the new government. Displacement due to intercommunal violence is therefore likely to remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. Indeed, over the last few months, tensions on the outskirts of Addis Ababa caused thousands to flee while another 70,000 people were forced from their homes in the western state of Benishangul-Gumuz. The government's push for premature returns in the south should not become the precedent for responding to ongoing and future displacement crises.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Ethiopian government must:*

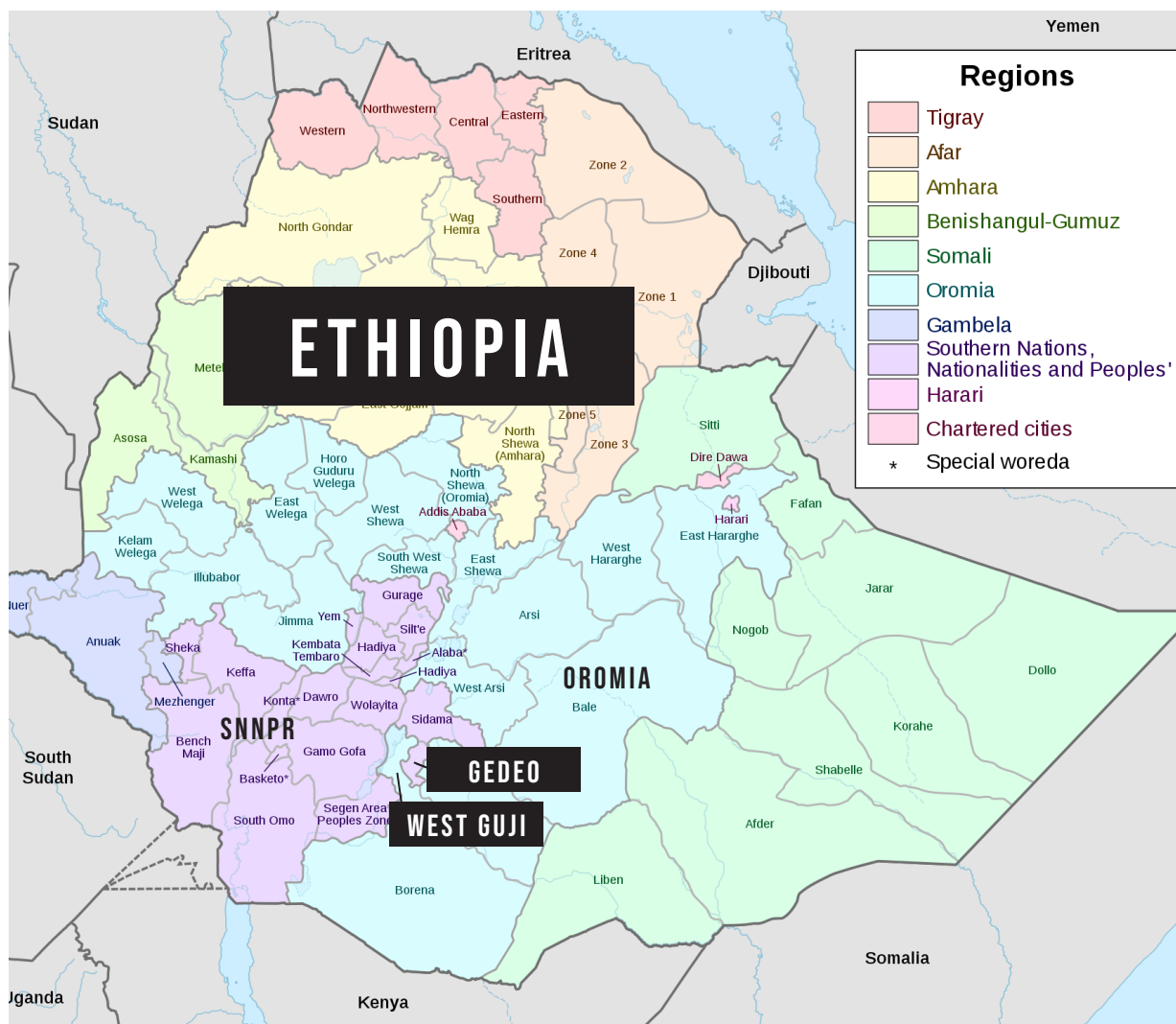
- **Refrain from carrying out premature, non-voluntary returns of internally displaced persons and allow aid organizations to provide humanitarian aid in IDP sites.** The government must allow aid organizations to provide assistance in both areas of displacement and areas of return. This will ensure that IDPs who genuinely decide to return voluntarily will receive the support they still need while those who are unable to return will not feel compelled to do so.
- **Establish a clear and transparent plan for voluntary returns.** This should include surveying the perspectives of IDPs on their intentions to return and facilitating more systematic ‘go-and-see’ visits so that IDPs can assess the conditions in areas of return. It must also include options for local integration or resettlement alternatives for those who feel they may never be able to return home.
- **Implement the return plan in close coordination with relief organizations.** Aid and development agencies must be informed of potential population movements so that they can be in place to support people who choose to return.
- **Prioritize freedom of movement for all IDPs.** Inform IDPs who have already been “re-turned” but are now living in secondary displacement sites that they can live where they feel safest. The government must commit to targeting assistance based on need.
- **Ratify the Kampala Convention.** While the government has signed the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention), it has not ratified the agreement. Prime Minister Abiy should therefore direct parliament to draft legislation that endorses ratification of the Convention as an affirmation of the rights of IDPs.
- **Increase internal capacity for responding to conflict IDPs.** The government should establish a separate unit of the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC) – which was created to address climate and natural disasters primarily – to specialize in assisting and protecting IDPs driven by conflict.

*The United Nations must:*

- **Promptly deploy a resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator (RC/HC) with a strong humanitarian background to Ethiopia.** The Humanitarian Country Team has been without a permanent RC/HC for several months. This critical position must be filled as soon as possible with an individual who has the skill set to respond to conflict displacement crises.
- **Develop common guidelines with the government for ensuring that returns are voluntary.** To this end, the Humanitarian Country Team must continue to promote guidance for organizations on providing life-saving assistance without contributing to policies and actions that may induce premature returns.

*Donor governments must:*

- **Provide more humanitarian funding for those most in need.** Ethiopia's humanitarian and disaster resilience plan has a gap of around \$400 million for what is needed between now and the end of the year.
- **Continue to press the Ethiopian government to refrain from carrying out non-voluntary, premature returns and to maintain humanitarian access in areas of displacement.** Convey to the country's leadership that humanitarian aid cannot be used to promote returns to unsafe and unsustainable situations.
- **Provide financial support for Prime Minister Abiy to create a unit within the NDRMC that specializes in coordinating responses to conflict displacement.** The U.S. government, specifically, should expand its existing support to the NDRMC to help establish this critical capacity.



Map of the zones of Ethiopia, highlighting West Guji and Gedeo zones. (Source: NordNordWest, Creative Commons)

## BACKGROUND

Ethiopia is currently experiencing remarkable political change. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 following the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn. Since then, he has ended the country's state of emergency, released political prisoners, fired controversial cabinet members and civil servants, lifted bans on websites and social media, and forged a peace deal with neighboring Eritrea.

While in recent years the government actively repressed political dissent and confronted protesters with violent crackdowns, Ethiopia's new leadership has invited formerly exiled opposition leaders back to the country. In September 2018, thousands of Ethiopians rallied on the streets of the capital, Addis Ababa, to welcome the return of the heads of opposition groups. The euphoria and sense of hope among ordinary Ethiopians for an open, inclusive society was palpable. As Abiy's Chief of Staff Fitsum Arega tweeted last month in welcoming opposition leadership, "A peaceful contest of ideas will move us from a culture of conflict into a culture of peace."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the significance of these measures, which offer an opportunity for Ethiopians to move past decades of repressive rule and toward a government that promotes democratic reforms and actively defends human rights.

Behind these positive headlines, however, the government faces enormous humanitarian challenges. The country is still reeling from

the impact of the 2015-16 drought induced by El Niño, its worst in 50 years.<sup>2</sup> The impact of this drought was compounded by below-average rainfall throughout 2017, which forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes, primarily in the south and southeastern parts of the country. At present, nearly 8 million people are food insecure and require humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup> Flooding has also caused displacement in a number of regions, including Afar, Oromia, and Somali. Additionally, Ethiopia serves as a generous host to almost 900,000 refugees, primarily from neighboring South Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

To add to these challenges, intercommunal violence stemming from unresolved grievances has broken out in several parts of the country. One of the locations most impacted is in southern Ethiopia, in the border area between the Oromia region and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). Major clashes have erupted twice before in this area. In 1995 and 1998, fighting broke out between two ethnic groups: the Gedeo, a minority ethnic group based mainly in SNNPR, and the Guji, a sub-group of the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group. The Gedeo are primarily agriculturalists, and the Guji are traditionally pastoralists. Tensions between the two groups have centered around land, border demarcation, and ethnic minority rights.<sup>5</sup>

After two decades of relative quiet, fighting erupted in April 2018 across the neighboring Gedeo and West Guji administrative zones. Armed mobs and youth groups attacked

1. Aaron Maasho, "Exiled leader of Ethiopian rebel group returns home amid reforms," Reuters, 15 September 2018.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/exiled-leader-of-ethiopian-rebel-group-returns-home-amid-reforms-idUSKCN1LV0GP> Also see: <https://twitter.com/fitsumaregaa/status/1040938728758272001?lang=en>

2. "El Niño in Ethiopia: Programme observations on the impact of the Ethiopia drought and recommendations for action," Oxfam, February 24, 2016, [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/eL\\_nino\\_ethiopia\\_240216-en.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/eL_nino_ethiopia_240216-en.pdf)

3. *2018 Ethiopia Humanitarian Disaster Resilience Plan Mid-Year Review*, Joint Government and Humanitarian Partners' Document, October 2018. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018\\_my\\_r\\_oct08j.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_my_r_oct08j.pdf)

4. "Ethiopia," The United Nations Refugee Agency, accessed November 2, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/ethiopia.html>

5. Girum Kinfemichael, "The Quest for Resolution of Guji-Gedeo Conflicts in Southern Ethiopia: A Review of Mechanisms Employed, Actors and Their Effectiveness," *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanity* 10, no 1 (2014), <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ejossah/article/view/109614/99379>

villages, forcing around 300,000 people to flee their homes. While the precise trigger remains unclear, government authorities made some arrests after a brief investigation and declared the situation resolved, leaving people to begin returning home. A few months later, in June, violence erupted once again on an even more intense scale. Over 800,000 people were forced to flee.<sup>6</sup> Tragically, many experienced horrific violence, including rape, gang rape, and murder. Entire villages were burned down.

## GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES COLLABORATE ON THE RESPONSE

To respond to the crisis, the Ethiopian government collaborated with the international humanitarian community, setting up Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) in the affected areas. Sectoral clusters led by the government and co-led by international organizations responded to critical needs of displaced persons, including food, nutrition, health, protection, and non-food items. Additionally, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the government conducted displacement tracking of IDPs. The government's willingness to work collaboratively with the UN, donor governments, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) on the response has been a highly welcome development and marks a departure from the prior government, which did not openly acknowledge the existence of conflict IDPs until last year.

Nonetheless, there have been challenges. There were few humanitarian organizations based in southern Ethiopia at the onset of the crisis. Government permissions for such groups to operate were required at the local levels, and the lines of communication between these levels of government were not always clear. Many of the aid organizations that did work in Ethiopia were oriented toward long-term development assistance and responding to slow-onset crises like droughts. As one senior humanitarian official said, "None of us were prepared to respond to a major IDP crisis. We did not have the support systems in place."

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Prime Minister Abiy's administration deserves credit for collaborating openly with UN agencies and other humanitarian organizations to ultimately mobilize and coordinate a large-scale response to the IDPs in Gedeo and West Guji.

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Prime Minister Abiy's administration therefore deserves credit for collaborating openly with UN agencies and other humanitarian organizations to ultimately mobilize and coordinate a large-scale response to the IDPs in Gedeo and West Guji. In late June, for example, the government and the United Nations launched a joint appeal for nearly \$120 million in funding to respond to the crisis.<sup>7</sup> In addition, EOCs, led by the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC), were established in Gedeo

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6. George Obulutsa, "Violence in southern Ethiopia forces more than 800,000 to flee," Reuters, July 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-violence/violence-in-southern-ethiopia-forces-more-than-800000-to-flee-idUSKBN1JU14W>

7. "2018 Response Plan to Internal Displacement Around Gedeo (SNNPR) and West Guji (Oromia) Zones," *Government of Ethiopia and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, June 22, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/response-plan-internal-displacement-around-gedeo-snnpr-and-west-guji-romia-zones-22>



and West Guji as hubs for coordinating the response between government and humanitarian actors. Previously, EOCs were only created in climate-induced emergencies and were based in Addis Ababa; they had never been deployed at the local or regional level. The EOCs in Gedeo and West Guji provided an invaluable opportunity for daily engagement and coordination between government officials, UN representatives, and staff from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss priority needs, available resources, and plans for targeted response efforts in a transparent and inclusive manner.

Humanitarian agencies were also mobilized to deploy mobile protection teams and improve the physical conditions in displacement sites, where IDPs suffered from overcrowding and poor sanitation. Unfortunately, the available resources did not match the overwhelming needs. When the government began to run low on its emergency food stocks, it partnered with the U.S. government's Food for Peace program to fill the gap and ensure regular food distributions.

## THE GOVERNMENT CHANGES COURSE

Unfortunately, just as the response to the displacement crisis was gaining momentum, the government began to push for premature returns. Government representatives have explained or justified those returns in different ways. A senior government official told RI that IDPs needed to return home in time for the coffee harvest since many owned or worked on coffee fields. The official also said that local integration was not an option because people had been displaced to areas that were already too densely populated. Other officials said that schools where IDPs were residing needed to be

vacated in time for the school year to begin in late September. Yet other officials said that returns needed to happen to avoid land grabs of vacant property.

These are all valid considerations relating to the urgency of creating conditions conducive to return. None, however, warrant non-voluntary, premature returns. If IDPs feel that it is safe to return to their coffee fields, they are free to do so. If they do not, and local integration in areas of displacement is not an option, then alternative resettlement options within the country can be made available. If schools need to be re-opened, the government can identify alternative temporary, suitable shelters for IDPs. Instead, the government moved ahead with a return plan that was problematic on many fronts.

## Pressure to return and secondary displacement

In order to incentivize people to return, the government began restricting aid in areas of displacement and told IDPs that they would only receive assistance if they returned home. IDPs interviewed by RI said they felt they had no choice but to return if they wanted to survive. On one occasion, staff from an INGO were detained when they tried to provide assistance in violation of these new restrictions. On another occasion, the government prevented the distribution of items like dignity kits for displaced women and girls.

The government also turned down requests by international organizations to conduct intention surveys. These surveys are used to determine whether IDPs want to return and, if not, why not. They would have enabled those who wanted to return to do so in an assisted, voluntary, and sustainable manner while allowing those who did not want to return to continue receiving urgently-needed humanitarian assistance at the displacement site. Instead, IDPs were told that aid would

be provided only at return areas, essentially leaving them no choice but to return.

The government subsequently transported IDPs by trucks and buses to areas near their homes. Many congregated at communal sites while some simply “disappeared” and were never accounted for. People could not rebuild their homes and restart their lives for two primary reasons: first, because many were afraid to do so, and second, because they had not been provided with the necessary funds, supplies, and tools to do so.

These population movements are therefore more accurately described as “secondary displacements” than as “returns.” While IDPs were physically moved to their home areas, the majority could not actually return to their houses. Rather, they were and are now still living in secondary displacement sites, sometimes only a few hundred meters from their former houses.

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“We prefer to stay together. We feel safer together. The ones who burned our houses, the ones who killed our neighbors, have not been brought to justice.”

**-IDP IN GEDEO ZONE, OROMIA REGION**

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RI staff visited several of these sites. A group of IDPs said that they had not returned to their houses because they did not feel that security had been restored. “We prefer to stay together. We feel safer together. The ones who burned our houses, the ones who killed our neighbors, have not been brought to justice.” This sentiment was repeated multiple times. Others said that, even if security was restored, they had

nothing to return to because their homes and businesses were destroyed.

The conditions that RI encountered in these secondary displacement sites were often desperate. At one location on the grounds of a church, people were living in extremely congested, makeshift shelters that were constructed using sticks and cloth. IDPs told RI they had no mattresses on which to sleep. Though IOM had recently installed emergency latrines, open defecation had previously been the only option.

## Unplanned movements

Government officials had informed some aid organizations of their intention to close IDP sites. However, they carried out the relocations without providing specific information about their plans. There was little opportunity for aid groups to establish basic assistance like shelter and sanitation facilities prior to the movements. The EOC meetings that had previously served as essential opportunities for sharing information no longer proved valuable. According to one aid official, “We would sit in an EOC meeting and nothing would be said about returns. Then, all of a sudden, buses would be moving that evening.”

While driving through southern Ethiopia along the Oromia/SNNP border region, RI encountered hundreds, if not thousands, of IDPs being loaded onto the back of open-air trucks. When interviewed, the IDPs said they had no choice but to leave the displacement sites if they wanted to receive assistance. Meanwhile, international aid staff had only been informed about the movement on the very morning that it was carried out; they were scrambling to track the movement in order to provide some form of assistance to IDPs upon their arrival at the return sites.

These sudden, unplanned movements pose serious risks. Without planning, there is no

opportunity to deploy protection officers to monitor transfers. In the case of Ethiopia, humanitarian actors did, in fact, later identify abuses committed against IDPs that occurred during the movement. Additionally, after relocation, it can be very difficult to track down IDPs who were receiving assistance for acute malnutrition in their first place of displacement. Consequently, an unknown number of IDP children have defaulted from targeted therapeutic feeding. Also, according to an aid official, while around 2,000 unaccompanied minors had been identified in the Gedeo zone and targeted for special protection support, some were nowhere to be found after unplanned and uncoordinated relocations took place.

Moreover, it creates additional expenses for aid organizations to shut down operations in one displacement site and scramble to provide services at secondary displacement locations. Some organizations resorted to diverting resources from their drought response to scale up the assistance for Gedeo and West Guji. The government's actions to push for premature returns thus contributed both to unnecessary harm and expense in a situation where the overall response was already critically underfunded.

## Lack of accountability

According to interviews with several aid workers, the edicts on returns appeared to come from the office of Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen. However, it is not apparent which government agency is responsible for organizing returns. Some officials at the local level said they were simply following orders, but it was not clear from whom those orders came. While the NDRMC was involved in coordinating the initial response to the crisis, the NDRMC commissioner did not seem to have authority in influencing the returns process. Several

aid staff told RI that they believed the then-Ministry for Federal Affairs and Pastoral Area Development was carrying forward the return effort, but they were not sure.<sup>8</sup>

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“I don’t think the government was being a bully. I think it was trying to do the right thing. But the government’s return plan became disconnected at every level...”

-AID WORKER

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Humanitarians on the ground are unclear as to why the government shifted abruptly to conducting forced returns. Reflecting on the confusion, one interviewee said, “I don’t think the government was being a bully. I think it was trying to do the right thing. But the government’s return plan became disconnected at every level—between the NDRMC and the EOCs; between humanitarian actors and the government. It became a big mess.” Whatever the truth about its motivations, the government is responsible, at the highest level, to address the ensuing harm and chaos.

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8. In October 2018, Prime Minister Abiy reshuffled his cabinet and created a new Ministry of Peace.

# HOSANNA, 31-YEAR-OLD MOTHER OF SIX

The RI team met with Hosanna<sup>1</sup>, a 31-year-old Gedeo mother of six. She described how she and her family fled when fighting broke out in their village. She said that Gedeo families were attacked, some people were killed, and homes were burned to the ground including her own. Her family fled to the nearest town where they stayed in a temporary displacement camp on a government-owned compound. She told RI that life was hard in the camp. Food, water, and shelter were very limited. Children suffered from all kinds of diseases.

After three months, government officials came and told them that it was safe for them to return and that they had to go home. The

officials informed them that there would be supplies for them in their home areas. “I was afraid to come back. We heard that men had been killed and a woman raped. But the government officials forced us to come here; they said we wouldn’t get help if we stayed.”

The government transported Hosanna and her family, along with hundreds of other IDPs, to an area that normally served as a coffee market and they have been staying there since. Conditions at the secondary displacement site are also extremely dire. While they are sharing small wooden huts usually used by coffee vendors, they are without mattresses, blankets, or clothing. There are no latrines. Their children have developed illnesses, like scabies.

While their original homes are located only kilometers away, Hosanna told RI that she does not want to go back because she is afraid, and their houses have been destroyed. “This

1. Name changed to protect the identity of the interviewee



Secondary displacement site near Yirgacheffe, Gedeo Zone, the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ (SNNP) Region, Ethiopia. (Photo by Refugees International)





A displaced family with a newborn baby. When asked why they haven't returned home, the young father explained, "We fear for our safety. There is no peace. I fear the people who did this are still there. They burned our houses – mine, my brother's and mother's – and 40 sacks of maize." West Guji Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia. (Photo by Refugees International)

area is usually a coffee market. Now we are being told to leave. This area belongs to rich coffee growers who want their land back. . . After September, coffee harvesting will begin. But who will construct our houses?" She told RI that in addition to a new shelter, her family urgently needs food, water, tools and equipment for farming, cooking utensils, and clothing. We asked her whether she was able to take anything with her when she fled. "No one preferred clothes or equipment to their lives."

## EDDEL, 30-YEAR-OLD MOTHER OF SIX

In the West Guji zone, the team visited a displacement site where 900 Guji IDP house-

holds have been residing for the past six months. When fighting broke out in their village in Gedeb in the Gedeo zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' region (SNNPR), they fled here on foot, walking 20 kilometers to a vacant piece of land across the regional border into Oromia.

The government has been trying to convince them to return to their homes, but they are unwilling to do so for fear of further attacks. There the RI team met with several IDPs including Eddel<sup>2</sup>, a 30-year-old mother of six. She described how when the fighting broke out one night, she and her family fled. As she was running, she turned to see that her brother-in-law who was behind her had fallen. When she ran back to help him, she found that he had been shot in the head and killed. He was 15 years old. "We don't want to go back to Gedeo. We are afraid to go back."

2. Name changed to protect the identity of the interviewee

## DILEMMA FOR AID ORGANIZATIONS: PRINCIPLES VS. PRAGMATISM

The actions by the government presented a dilemma for aid organizations and the donors who fund them. When Ethiopian officials declared that aid could no longer be delivered in locations of displacement, but only in areas of return, humanitarian organizations – including both the UN and NGOs – had a choice to make. They could follow the government’s edict and assist only in return areas. However, this would risk legitimizing premature returns and facilitating non-voluntary movements to locations that remained unsafe. Conversely, they could take a principled stance and cease providing aid until the government allowed them to deliver assistance in both displacement and return locations. However, this would exacerbate the suffering of twice-displaced IDPs while they awaited a policy change that was not guaranteed.

At the time of RI’s visit, UN agencies and NGOs were attempting to find a compromise by providing only the most basic life-saving services in areas of return while advocating to the government to also allow assistance in areas of displacement. As one aid worker told RI, “We don’t want to incentivize returns, but we also don’t want to leave people without assistance.” Another said the key question was, “How do we avoid doing harm?,” conscious that aid provision in areas of return might be the immediate priority in order to save lives. However, this risks setting a precedent wherein international agencies assist with – and thereby appear to endorse – non-voluntary returns.

Several donors of international organizations active in the response were considering

taking a hard line with the government—they considered aid for non-voluntary returns to cross a “red line” and would thus suspend their assistance as a matter of principle. “Once you compromise, then you open the breach. That’s it,” said a senior donor government official. However, it did not appear that all donors and humanitarian organizations agreed over what would constitute such a “red line” and whether withdrawing assistance for areas of return would be the most constructive approach.

In RI’s view, it would be inappropriate for humanitarians to threaten to suspend life-saving assistance as part of an effort to establish “red lines” with the government. Absent aid provision in collective sites of return, the humanitarian situation will deteriorate, increasing the suffering of IDPs. Therefore, agencies should respond in areas of secondary displacement. However, this must be joined by sustained, vigorous, and high-level advocacy with Prime Minister Abiy and his office – by both donor governments and UN leadership – to press for consistent access in areas of displacement.

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“We don’t want to incentivize returns, but we also don’t want to leave people without assistance.”

-AID WORKER

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To their credit, donor governments have been at the forefront of pushing Prime Minister Abiy’s administration to improve its IDP policies. Calls to refrain from carrying out non-voluntary returns have been foremost. In early September, key donor government officials in Addis Ababa met with the deputy prime minister’s office to convey concerns about the return process. Unfortunately, that

advocacy effort had yet to yield clear results at the time of RI's visit. Donors must both sustain and elevate this effort by bringing these messages directly to the prime minister himself. Further, visiting officials from donor capitals must also carry strong messages of concern about the government's treatment of IDPs.

With regard to advocacy from the UN, the position of UN resident coordinator/humanitarian coordinator (RC/HC) for Ethiopia has been vacant since June. While there is currently an interim coordinator in place, the post must be filled permanently and as soon as possible with an individual who has a strong humanitarian background and experience in conflict displacement. One objective of the RC/HC must be to coordinate UN agencies' advocacy toward the government around non-voluntary returns to ensure that the UN speaks with one voice. The most senior UN humanitarian position must be in place to work with the government on common guidelines to ensure that humanitarian principles are implemented in the response, including that all returns are voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable.

## THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO CONFLICT DISPLACEMENT: LOOKING FORWARD

At the beginning of 2018, the Ethiopian government, in partnership with humanitarian agencies, launched a country-wide Humanitarian and Disaster Resilience Plan

(HDRP). With regards to conflict displacement, it included all the right language. For example, it "encourages (1) voluntary return to areas of origin; (2) voluntary integration with host communities; and (3) voluntary resettlement to selected areas."<sup>9</sup> However, the government's response to displacement in Gedeo and West Guji both contradicted and upended the good intentions laid out in the HDRP. As discussed above, many returns have not been voluntary, and thus far, IDPs lack opportunities for local integration or resettlement to alternative locations.

By late September, the government had already moved to return most of the IDPs in Gedeo and West Guji, the majority of whom are now in secondary displacement sites near their home areas. Since RI's field mission, there are reports of continuing clashes in Gedeo and West Guji and of people fleeing from these secondary displacement sites then being "returned" again. According to communication with an aid official at the end of October 2018, "We are now witnessing circular 'returns' as IDPs shift back and forth from place to place in search of safety and security." The government must cease carrying out returns unless they are truly voluntary. This means supporting the provision of assistance both in areas of displacement and in areas of return. Aid must never be utilized to induce premature returns, especially not while insecurity persists.

Critically, violence and displacement are occurring in regions beyond Gedeo and West Guji. At the end of September 2018, tensions on the outskirts of Addis Ababa caused thousands to flee. In early October 2018, 70,000 people were targeted along ethnic lines in the western state of Benishangul-Gumuz and fled their homes.<sup>10</sup> It is thus essential that the government work quickly to

9. "2018 Ethiopia Humanitarian Disaster Resilience Plan," Joint Government of Ethiopia and the Humanitarian Country Team Document, March 2018. [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia\\_2018\\_humanitarian\\_and\\_disaster\\_resilience\\_plan\\_2.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia_2018_humanitarian_and_disaster_resilience_plan_2.pdf)

10. "'Thousands flee' ethnic conflict in western Ethiopia," *BBC News*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-afri-ca-45724440>

develop appropriate, sustainable responses to protect and assist its displaced citizens.

To this end, the government must develop a detailed and comprehensive plan for returns to realize the aspirations of the HDRP. It should clarify which government agency is responsible for coordinating return efforts and include plans to conduct intentions surveys, systematic ‘go-and-see’ visits, integration plans for IDPs who will not return, and options for alternative resettlement locations within the country.

To be clear, it is reasonable and appropriate for the government to relocate IDPs who are occupying public facilities or schools that must be re-opened. However, this must be done in a planned, thoughtful way that offers choice and that prevents causing additional harm. Return to unsafe, unsuitable locations cannot be an option.

Further, any relocation and return efforts must be done in transparent collaboration with aid organizations. This will allow relief groups to help ensure that basic services, such as water and sanitation, are available at return sites upon IDPs’ arrival. It will also help groups track children who are receiving specialized services such as therapeutic treatment for acute malnutrition, to prevent breaks in their needed assistance. Additionally, protection monitors must be deployed to monitor the movements themselves.

For IDPs who have already been ‘returned,’ there is a risk that they will be involuntarily moved yet again. Some are residing in public spaces, on market lands, and on the grounds of privately-owned locations. If the land must be reclaimed and IDPs are not ready to return to their houses, the government must identify appropriate alternative sites and inform IDPs of their options.

Prime Minister Abiy should direct his government to draft a policy governing the protection and rights of IDPs throughout the country. This policy should be underpinned by the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance for IDPs in Africa (known as the Kampala Convention). Ethiopia has signed the Convention but has not yet moved toward ratification. Therefore, Ethiopia’s parliament should draft legislation that endorses its ratification. In addition to providing assistance for IDPs, countries that are party to the Kampala Convention are required to ensure the voluntary character of returns, as well as to create suitable conditions for local integration or relocation in a safe and dignified manner. The government should invite senior IDP experts from agencies such as UNHCR, OCHA, and IOM to engage with the appropriate government agencies and parliamentary committees to advise on the development of national IDP policies.

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**Aid must never be utilized to induce premature returns, and especially not while insecurity persists.**

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One reform that the prime minister could implement immediately is to create a unit within the NDRMC that specializes in coordinating responses to conflict displacement. The NDRMC was established in 2008, primarily to lead emergency response and preparedness activities for natural disasters such as droughts and floods. To this end, the U.S. Forest Service has provided capacity-building support to the NDRMC as its key donor partner since its inception.<sup>11</sup> However, responding to conflict displacement is not a role for the

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11. Ethiopia Disaster Management Program Fact Sheet, U.S. Forest Service, accessed November 2, 2018, [https://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media\\_wysiwyg/ethiopia\\_dmp\\_ame\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/media_wysiwyg/ethiopia_dmp_ame_fact_sheet.pdf)





An IDP family living in a makeshift shelter in an informal, secondary displacement site on church grounds where almost 6,000 IDPs were living in squalid, unsanitary, and unsafe conditions. West Guji Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia. (Photo by Refugees International)

U.S. Forest Service. In creating a new unit of the NDRMC, the government should seek to partner with agencies specialized in conflict-induced crises, such as the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) or the European Union's European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

## CONCLUSION

Prime Minister Abiy has undertaken impressive reforms to open political space and advance the promotion of human rights in a country that has experienced years of repression and one-party rule. However, the government can consolidate progress and continue down the path toward positive reform by adapting its response to conflict IDPs. Most urgently, the government must ensure that IDPs do not feel forced to return prematurely

and that any returns that do take place are safe and dignified. Donor governments must hold the government of Ethiopia to account and stand ready to support it in realizing this. Donors should also provide strong humanitarian assistance and fill the acute funding gap that remains. The humanitarian response throughout the country – including for those impacted by drought and other climate factors – requires an additional \$416 million through the end of the year.<sup>12</sup> Any money that does come through must be utilized as efficiently, effectively, and appropriately as possible. Establishing an organized and transparent plan for voluntary and sustainable returns will contribute to that end.

**REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL SENIOR  
ADVOCATE AND UN LIASON MARK YARNELL  
TRAVELED TO ETHIOPIA IN SEPTEMBER  
2018.**

12. "2018 Ethiopia Humanitarian Disaster Resilience Plan Mid-Year Review," Joint Government of Ethiopia and the Humanitarian Country Team Document, October 2018. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018\\_my\\_r\\_oct08j.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_my_r_oct08j.pdf)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We are an independent organization and do not accept any government or UN funding.



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