

Eritrean Refugees in Shimelba camp, Tigray Region, Ethiopia

Background

The Eritrean refugees first crossed into Ethiopia soon after the end of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict in May 2000. The refugees were initially settled in a location called Waalanhibi in the Tigray Region in northern Ethiopia, some 1,200 kms north of Addis Ababa. As that location was too close to the border with Eritrea, the camp was relocated to Shimelba in June 2004. Shimelba camp is situated approximately 33 kms south of Sheraro town, located in Tatyabo Woreda in Tigray Region, where UNHCR is presently located with a satellite office. The area is semi-desert, with temperatures up to 42 degrees celsius during the dry season. The rainy season is from June to September each year. The main refugee population in the camp is Eritrean. They belong to the following ethnicities: Afar, Bilen, Kunama, Saho and Tigrinya.

Plans are underway to relocate the office from Sheraro to Shire, which is 1,100 kms north of Addis Ababa. The overall security situation in the area is stable, however there has been a gradual build-up of Eritrean and Ethiopian army personnel and equipment along the border, leading to fears of the possibility of a renewed outbreak of violence between the two countries.

Refugee population

The table below shows the refugee population in Shimelba camp as of 11 October 2007

Origin	Female	Male	Total
Eritrea	3,493	11,507	15,000

Registration

UNHCR Sheraro uses Progres database to manage refugee population information at Shimelba camp. To maximize the value of the database, staff have undertaken verification to improve the quality of data, specifically: dates of birth, particularly of possible unaccompanied minors; house locations; marriages and family reunions in the camp after arrival; and registering the vulnerabilities for all new arrivals, with a view towards doing so for all residents of the camp. Data verification to register new arrivals is ongoing.

Protection

Special protection needs of women and girls

Refugee women have special protection needs in Shimelba camp as they are facing increasing sexual and gender-based violence, ranging from domestic violence in the home, to rape and assault in the community and violence committed by local people when women travel to collect firewood. The demography of Shimelba camp, particularly

among Tigrinya refugees, where men outnumber women 5:1, increases the challenges in solving these problems.

Women in Shimelba camp also have to contend with specific health issues. Substantial number of women suffer from gynecological and kidney infections and sexually transmitted diseases. In the absence of affordable and discreet alternatives, traditional abortions in the camp are common. These traditional abortions, however, may entail additional forms of violence on the women undergoing them.

Female new arrivals face challenges in obtaining adequate shelter. They have difficulty constructing their homes and there are few alternatives at present other than to live with others in the camp, oftentimes unrelated men.

Since the protection needs of refugees, especially the females, are high in Shimelba camp, a Gender Officer, seconded by IRC to UNHCR, was assigned recently, as well as a national female Protection Assistant. Furthermore, using the High Commissioners' Special Carry-Over Funds, money is being utilized to implement GBV related programs, such as special housing for refugee women and victims of GBV.

Special protection needs of elderly

Where family structures have been replicated in Shimelba camp, protection of the elderly has been somewhat realized. Where those structures do not exist, particularly in the Tigrinya community, protection problems exist. Health care problems, such as malaria and gastrointestinal disorders afflict the elderly significantly. The elderly have difficulties in gathering wood and water and preparing food, because they are either unable or unwilling to do so on their own. Community Services of IRC maintains a list of elderly refugees and tries to assist them also with non-food items such as blankets and mosquito nets.

Special protection needs of children

Children, particularly unaccompanied minors, face specific problems in the refugee camp. UNHCR is at present working on identifying all unaccompanied minors but face certain challenges. Young people perceive some benefit in being 'under 18', and as such it is difficult to quantify their exact age. Providing adequate shelter for unaccompanied children is a challenge and impacts on the educational and on nutritional status of the children.

Security and camp management

The camp is located thirty kilometers from the Eritrean border, and there are concerns for refugee protection in the event of another war. Camp management should be seen in the context of the proximity to the border, the steady flow of new arrivals and the overall environment of the area. A strong national security interest on the part of the Ethiopian government restricts movement in and out of the camp. This is enforced by limited access to resettlement and possible refoulement.

The camp has organically expanded, and refugees are responsible for constructing their homes. Toilets are usually placed at the periphery, leading to increased SGBV. Saho refugees and other minority groups are dispersed among the majority Tigrinya which also leads to protection problems.

The camp's location and population put pressure on natural resources such as water, wood, grass for roof construction and grazing land. Competition can be intense for these resources.

UNHCR works in partnership with ARRA to manage the camp with the understanding that refugee protection and preserving human rights must be balanced with state interests but should take priority where possible. UNHCR also works with the police and local security agencies to ensure that the refugee population is protected. Although refugees need to obtain pass permits in order to leave the camp, they can obtain those permits fairly easily when the security situation in the area is calm. Access to the local legal system is limited however.

Durable solutions

Resettlement is a high-profile and high-intensity activity in Shimelba camp. UNHCR recently completed group resettlement of over 500 Kunama refugees to the United States with the assistance of IOM. UNHCR is also continuing to identify refugees from other ethnic groups on the basis of protection needs.

As expectations for resettlement are high among the refugees in Shimelba camp, a Resettlement Officer, seconded by ICMC to UNHCR, and a national Resettlement Clerk, were assigned to Sheraro office.

Repatriation takes place less frequently than resettlement and focuses on the elderly and unaccompanied children whose best interest it is to return to Eritrea. UNHCR works closely with ICRC in facilitating repatriation to Eritrea.

Partners

The following implementing partners work closely with UNHCR in meeting the needs of the refugee community in Shimelba camp in 2007.

International Rescue Committee (IRC)	• Community Services
	• Youth Program
	• Vocational Training
	• Water and Sanitation
	• Education (formal and non formal)
	• Gender-based Violence Prevention and Response
Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA)	• Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention and Response
	• Camp Management
	• Food Distribution Partner of WFP

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Protection
Dutch Refugee Relief (ZOA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Education • Vocational Training • Peace Building
National Relief and Development Program (NRDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Rehabilitation

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