

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	648
Land:	Etiopien
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Ethiopia: Fighting, Abuses Putting Sudanese Refugees at Risk. "Thousands in Amhara Camps Need Security, Relocation to Safer Areas"
Udgivet:	17. oktober 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. december 2024

Ethiopia: Fighting, Abuses Putting Sudanese Refugees at Risk

Thousands in Amhara Camps Need Security, Relocation to Safer Areas



A Sudanese refugee washes his clothes at Kumer refugee camp, near Maganan, in Ethiopia's Amhara region, on March 1, 2024. © 2024 MICHELE SPATARI/AFP via Getty Images

- Recent fighting between Ethiopian government forces and militias in the northwestern Amhara region has put Sudanese refugees at grave risk.
- For more than a year, unidentified gunmen subjected the refugees to killings, beatings, abductions, and forced labor.
- The Ethiopian government should take adequate measures to protect the Sudanese refugees, prohibit forced returns, and ensure, with international support, adequate humanitarian assistance.

(Nairobi) – Recent fighting between [Ethiopian](#) government forces and Fano militias in the northwestern Amhara region has put Sudanese refugees in and around camps near the Sudan border at grave risk, Human Rights Watch said today. The Ethiopian government should step up protection of the refugees, who, for more than a year have been subjected to abuses and fighting by unidentified gunmen, militias, and more recently government forces.

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan in April 2023, tens of thousands of Sudanese and other nationals have sought refuge in Ethiopia. Many initially went to two refugee camps in the Amhara region, where local gunmen and militias carried out killings, beatings, looting, abductions for ransom, and forced labor. In July 2024, Ethiopian

and United Nations refugee authorities relocated thousands of refugees to a new camp in Amhara. Since early September, Fano, an Amhara armed group, has [clashed with federal forces](#) near refugee sites, and occupied some sites, putting refugees at further risk of attack.

“Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia have been targets of abuses for more than a year from various armed actors,” said [Laetitia Bader](#), deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “These refugees have fled horrific abuses back home and urgently need protection, not further threats to their lives.”

Between May and September Human Rights Watch interviewed by phone twenty Sudanese refugees at three refugee camps and at a transit center in the Amhara region, and spoke to Sudanese activists and aid workers. Human Rights Watch also analyzed satellite imagery of the camps and transit center, and videos and photographs sent to researchers or posted online. Human Rights Watch sent its preliminary findings to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ethiopian government’s Refugee and Returnee Services (RRS), and received responses on September 25 and October 8, respectively.

Since June 2023, unidentified gunmen and local militias have repeatedly targeted refugees at the Awlala and Kumer camps in the West Gonder Zone, committing serious abuses including at least three killings. The federal government established these camps in areas experiencing criminality and recurring skirmishes between local communities even before conflict broke out in Amhara, but then provided only limited security at the camps, Human Rights Watch found.

On May 1, after months of violent incidents, more than 1,000 Sudanese refugees [left the camps in protest](#), intending to reach the UNHCR office in Gonder town. Ethiopian police blocked the refugees, forcing them to shelter in a [forested area](#) along the road.

“We wanted to be safe when we left Sudan, but the beatings and robbery [in Ethiopia] were a lot for us to take,” said a 45-year-old refugee. “We have been going through this for one year, and every time the [Ethiopian authorities] promise something, nothing changes. We couldn’t take it anymore.”

In late July, UNHCR and RRS [relocated](#) over 2,000 refugees from Awlala and Kumer to the newly established Aftit site, also in West Gonder Zone. Many refugees sheltering in Awlala forest refused to be relocated to Aftit, fearing more violence. However, gunmen then attacked them almost daily, compelling them to leave the forest on August 8 and move toward Metemma town, near the Sudanese border.

Ethiopian authorities initially allowed them to set up temporary shelters on the roadside, but on August 21, Ethiopian forces ordered the refugees to move to the Metemma transit center. When the refugees refused, security forces destroyed their makeshift shelters and beat the refugees.

“I got beaten on my right ribs five times,” said a 45-year-old refugee. “My kids were crying. Someone asked the military and police to stop beating me in front of my kids. They started insulting us, saying if we didn’t want to stay in Ethiopia, then we should go back to our country, to Sudan.”

Several hundred of these refugees were sent back to Sudan. UNHCR said they returned voluntarily, though several refugees told Human Rights Watch that government security forces forcibly returned them to Sudan, including by separating some families in the process. RRS said there was “no reason to return refugees to Sudan because the situation there does not allow repatriation.”

On September 1, fighting between Fano and the Ethiopian military intensified near the Metemma transit center and Aftit camp.

Ethiopia is party to the [UN](#) refugee convention and the [1969 African](#) refugee convention, both of which prohibit refoulement, the return of refugees to a place where their life or freedom would be threatened. This includes so-called “constructive refoulement,” in which a government puts so much direct or indirect pressure on refugees that they feel compelled to return to their home country. In May 2023, UNHCR [guidance](#) urged countries to suspend all forced returns to Sudan, given the insecurity and ongoing risks.

The warring parties to the armed conflict in Amhara are bound by international humanitarian law. Both government forces and non-state armed groups are prohibited from attacking civilians and civilian objects, are obligated to take all feasible measures to minimize harm to civilians, and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. Refugees are protected as civilians, as are refugee camps, unless used for military purposes.

All military forces and armed groups should end abuses against refugees, stay out of the camps, and facilitate the safe delivery of humanitarian aid, Human Rights Watch said.

Ethiopia’s international partners should press the government to ensure the protection of refugees, halt any forced returns, and increase humanitarian support to refugees, including relocation to safer areas.

UNHCR told Human Rights Watch that it continues to advocate for expanding refugee resettlement areas outside of Ethiopia. RRS stated that it “is continuously monitoring the situation to adjust its protection strategies in response to any developments in the conflict,” and that the international community’s response to its call for greater assistance has been minimal.

“The Ethiopian government should uphold its obligations to protect refugees in its territory and relocate them as possible, away from the war zone,” Bader said. “Ethiopia’s international partners should be increasing support for these refugees so that they receive medical care, food, shelter, and other emergency assistance.”

Refugees in the Amhara Region, Ethiopia

Ethiopia currently hosts over [90,000 Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers](#), including [more than 38,000](#) who fled following [the outbreak of armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces](#) in April 2023. [Over 10,000](#) refugees of other nationalities have also fled Sudan into Ethiopia. Ethiopian authorities recognized newly arriving Sudanese as so-called prima facie refugees; meaning they were entitled to refugee status based on nationality rather than personal circumstances.

Refugees were initially housed in the Awlala and Kumer camps in the Amhara region in 2023, and in Kurmuk camp in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. By April 2024, Awlala and Kumer camps were [hosting over 8,500 refugees](#) who had fled Sudan, mainly Sudanese, along with Eritrean and South Sudanese refugees.

The camps are in an area with longstanding [tensions](#) and [conflict between](#) ethnic [Amhara and Qemant communities](#), and an [increase in robberies and abductions for ransom](#).

Armed conflict had broken out in the Amhara region in August 2023 between the Ethiopian military and the Fano militia, leading to widespread violations of the laws of war, including unlawful attacks on civilians, and [assaults on aid workers](#) and [health care](#).

Civilian access to humanitarian aid has remained severely constrained. On May 24, gunmen fired at a humanitarian convoy traveling between Gonder and Metemma, killing an aid worker.

An Awlala camp resident said in May:

The camp was in the middle of villages. You would see many young men crossing the camp, carrying guns. Last month there was fighting between the villages. We were trapped in the middle.... Each day we heard someone was killed. When an ambulance tried to carry injured people, armed groups shot two people in the ambulance in the camp.



Two men, one carrying a Kalashnikov-style assault rifle, walking through Kumer Camp, posted online on June 23. © 2024 Sudan Media Channel

In its response to Human Rights Watch, the Ethiopian refugee service, RRS, said the Awlala and Kumer sites were established at a time when there was a large influx of asylum seekers. It said the sites “were relatively close to conflict areas,” and that while there were adequate security measures, the escalating conflict in Amhara exposed the sites to risks that prompted their closure in July.

Abuses at Awlala and Kumer Refugee Camps (July 2023 – July 2024)

Sudanese refugees in Awlala and Kumer camps said that groups of gunmen, whom Human Rights Watch has been unable to identify, committed numerous abuses against refugees at or near the camps, including beatings, robbery and theft, abduction for ransom, and forced labor. They especially targeted refugees with smartphones or money. One refugee said that in July 2024:

Three men carrying guns came to my tent one night where I was sleeping with my daughters and son.... They asked me about my telephones, money. [They warned that] if I said no, they would shoot me. I gave them my phone. They still shot into my tent. My children were afraid.

Several refugees said that refugees had been shot outside the camp while seeking essential services. On June 16, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a minivan returning to Kumer camp, killing a 31-year-old Sudanese refugee, Adila, a mother of two, who was also three months pregnant and had gone for medical care. Another refugee, 51, had taken his 18-month-old son to the hospital and was returning in the minivan. “On our way back, the gunfire started, and I got shot in the leg,” he said. “The minivan stopped. Everyone got out and started running.... Adila got shot in the head. Three Ethiopians were also killed.”

Human Rights Watch reviewed two videos, and four photographs posted to Facebook on June 17 that show Adila’s body in Gendewuha hospital. Her dress is covered in blood and a photograph shows at least two bullet wounds on the side of her head. Her death certificate, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, states that she died of excessive bleeding and a penetrating head injury caused by bullet wounds.



Adila's body, covered by a green sheet, on a stretcher near the site where she was killed in July 2024 according to a source. © 2024 Private

Kumer residents said that militias subjected refugees at Awlala and Kumer camps to forced labor. "When [the militias] find us, they ask for a phone, money," said a 43-year-old Sudanese man. "If they find nothing, they'll take you away and force you to work on the farms. We tried to report this, but there is no one to report to." Another refugee said local militia forced his younger brother to work in 2023: "The militias kidnapped him to the mountains for 15 days and made him harvest corn. They said they would kill him if he didn't do the work. They threw him out when they were done with him."

The refugee community provided Human Rights Watch with a list that described 347 incidents of forced labor in 2023 and 2024.

Residents of Awlala and Kumer camps said the Ethiopian federal government provided limited security at the camps.

In Kumer, federal police set up a post on the edges of camp. A 45-year-old Kumer resident said: "The attacks happened inside the camps, but the federal police weren't protecting us, just themselves. It wasn't even safe for them.... We were on our own."

Awlala residents said authorities tasked local militiamen with their protection, despite tensions existing among the different communities in the area. "The militias would have shifts. Sometimes we would be without protection for a week," said one refugee. "The militias also robbed us. And they did nothing to stop the other attacks."

Human Rights Watch geolocated a video posted on YouTube on May 9 but filmed on an unconfirmed date that shows a group of armed men, some in military fatigues and others in civilian clothing, moving among tents in Kumer camp and shouting orders at the refugees in Arabic such as “Get down!” One gunman talks to a man lying on a bed, then picks up a stick and hits the man’s bed.

A UNHCR [statement on May 6 acknowledged](#) the difficult security situation and said that UNHCR, RRS, and Amhara regional authorities were engaged with refugees on steps to “address the situation, which includes increased police patrols.”

On July 17, gunmen attacked Kumer camp, [killing 10 Ethiopian federal police and injuring a 3 or 4-year-old refugee child](#). “I was in my tent when the gunfire started around 5 a.m.,” said a 51-year-old camp resident. “They came from behind the refugee tents and started shooting at the police. The police couldn’t respond; I think because they didn’t want to hurt us. The gunmen took 10 police behind the camp and killed them all.” The RRS stated that 11 other police officers were wounded while on duty at Kumer but claimed that no refugee was harmed.

Human Rights Watch reviewed two videos posted online on July 18 that appear to show gunfire in Kumer camp. The first shows three people in camouflage, carrying assault rifles in front of a row of tents as gunshots ring out. In the second, a person is filming inside a tent. A male voice speaking over the sound of repeated gunfire says in Arabic: “Six a.m., Wednesday morning, July 17, 2024, ... [there is] armed conflict in Kumer camp.” Human Rights Watch was unable to verify the location of either video but did not find any version of the videos online before July 18.

One photograph and two videos posted to social media on July 17, and four photographs shared with Human Rights Watch appear to show the aftermath of the attack. Human Rights Watch counted at least nine men wearing Ethiopian federal police uniforms, motionless on the ground but was unable to verify the location or date these images were taken.

On July 20, UNHCR and RRS [announced](#) the relocation of Sudanese refugees to Aftit camp, near Gendewuha town in West Gonder Zone. In its response to Human Rights Watch, RRS said that about 2,000 refugees had asked to return to Sudan due to the lack of services and security concerns at the Awlala and Kumer camps, but that after discussions between the refugees, RRS, UNHCR, federal and regional security forces, and other partners, “the refugees agreed to be relocated to Aftit refugee site, where none of them returned to Sudan.” By late August, the authorities had [relocated](#) 6,914 refugees to Aftit.

Makeshift Camp in Awlala Forest (May–July 2024)

On May 1, more than [1,000 refugees left Awlala and Kumer camps to protest](#) continuing abuses by gunmen. Two kilometers from Awlala, Ethiopian federal police blocked them from continuing to Gonder town. The refugees spoke with RRS and UN officials, who encouraged them to return to the camps. Most refused and took shelter in a [forested area](#) along the roadway.

The refugees remained there for about 100 days, relying on donations from Sudanese in the diaspora to eat. “We would try and buy flour, *shiro* [chickpea flour] with the money sent to us, but sometimes the federal police would take it and spill it on the road,” said one refugee. “They wanted us to go back to the camp.”

Though federal police and military forces guarded the road near the forest, they withdrew after gunmen attacked the police at Kumer camp on July 17.

Gunmen soon began to attack the forest encampment. A [July 20 attack](#) by gunmen killed at least [two refugees and wounded nine](#). A 27-year-old refugee said the attack started around 8 p.m.:

I went out on the main road and saw armed men get out of a vehicle.... [W]e heard gunfire from the north side. People were screaming ... five meters from me, someone was shot and died. It was very scary.... Two people were killed, a husband, Umran, and wife, Maimouna. Maimouna died immediately, a direct gunshot. Umran was shot in the chest.

The attacks continued. On August 2, seven gunmen robbed a 38-year-old man selling goods. “I hid my phone in my pocket, but they still hit me with their weapons,” he said. “I was hit badly on my spine and was urinating blood for a long time.” The man said three other refugees were shot and badly injured.

On August 8, refugees began a seven-day trek with little water or food to Metemma town.

Refugee Returns at the Border (August 2024)

Three refugees who joined those heading toward the border said government security forces stopped them from going to the border and markets in Metemma town. “RRS officials came and spoke with the security forces who told us to return to the camp or hand over our [refugee] registration cards and then leave,” said one refugee. Another said: “They said if we wanted to continue, we had to hand over our papers. We refused. This was the only identification we have.”

Refugees stayed along the main road, relying on boiled grass and water for sustenance.

On August 21, Ethiopian soldiers, federal police, and local militia ordered the refugees to go to the Metemma transit center. When the refugees refused, security forces destroyed their makeshift shelters and beat refugees.

Refugees said that the security forces arbitrarily divided the refugees into two groups. Some were forced to go to Metemma transit center and others back to Sudan. “They started hitting people and ordered us to leave for Sudan, and if they didn’t go ‘there would be consequences,” said a 40-year-old woman forced to go to the transit center. “They were hitting women too. I was beaten. The military asked us to walk in lines, and after a while, they started hitting us again.”

While some refugees wished to return to Sudan, they said they hoped the process would be monitored by international agencies.

“We wanted to go with IOM [International Organization for Migration]. We wanted to preserve our rights and go properly,” said a community leader. Instead, “[w]e were made to cross the border by being threatened with weapons, beaten with sticks and, with Sudanese authorities waiting on the other side.”

Another refugee said his family and others were separated in a rushed and disorganized process:

I was forced to go back to [Metemma] transit camp with my two children. The forces, as well as UN and RRS officials left after taking us there. We were left without tents, food, or anything. I looked for my two sisters and couldn't find them. They called me around 5 p.m. and told me they were with their children in Sudan.

One woman said she was forced to the transit center and separated from her three children, the youngest 11, who were among those pushed back to Sudan.

UNHCR told Human Rights Watch that they had access to the refugees prior to their return and available options were discussed with them, including returning to Sudan or relocation to Aftit camp, and that some refugees had previously expressed to UNHCR an intention to return to Sudan if they could not be relocated to a third country. UNHCR further added that, “On 21 August, some 760 Sudanese refugees voluntarily crossed the border from Ethiopia back to Sudan according to the Ethiopian authorities monitoring the crossing point.... [S]ome refugees opted to enter the Metemma Transit Centre instead of returning to Sudan, with some later deciding to relocate to the Aftit settlement.”

In its response, RRS stated that Human Rights Watch’s findings of “abuses, killings, looting, etc. against Sudanese refugees by local militia and informal gangs is unfounded and erroneous.” RRS added that the Ethiopian government had “zero tolerance to abuse against refugees,” and that there “had been no instances of forced transfer, either by the government or any entity.”

After Sudanese refugees returned to Sudan’s Gedaref state, the governor [visited](#) al Galabat town, where authorities established an emergency camp for returnees. The governor [said](#) in an interview that many of those returnees are youth and called on them to join training camps to defeat rebel forces.

Fighting at Metemma Transit Center and Aftit Refugee Camp

The refugees forced to go to the Metemma transit center did not have shelter, food, or security. In its response to Human Rights Watch, RRS said that essential services for refugees at Aftit and Metemma, including food distribution, health care, and education, had been transferred to other implementing partners. RRS added that while refugees were receiving basic food to meet their nutritional needs, “there had been shortages to ensuring sufficient food supplies,” and that other services such as shelter and medical transport were not consistently available.

On September 1, Ethiopian soldiers clashed with Fano militia near Metemma town, and in the ensuing days in and around Metemma transit center. A 43-year-old Sudanese man in the

transit center said that on September 5, “Fano [militia] came and organized their forces inside the center. They regularly come, but they were huge in number this time. The battle is still going on and we are all on the floor. The refugees are silent and scared.” Clashes continued in the Metemma transit center on September 6.

“The military is now fighting against Fano who are inside the camp, firing back,” said one Sudanese woman. “A fighter was just shooting from behind me. Yesterday [September 5], Fano spent the night with us. Today, it is the military that came in the morning and Fano are firing at them. Wherever you look, you can find them.”



Ethiopian military convoy moving through Metemma transit center on September 12, 2024, according to the photo's source. Human Rights Watch geolocated the photo to the transit center. © 2024 Private

A 20-year-old refugee in the transit center said that on September 6 Fano militia forced him to carry a dead Fano fighter toward the Aftit camp. “There were a lot of them,” he said. “My brother got injured on his shoulder from a nail on the bed. At a distance we saw more armed groups outside the camp. They brought the body into the camp.... A car came to take the body around 8 p.m., and the Fano eventually left.”

Ethiopian forces and Fano militia also fought near Aftit camp on September 8. One witness said:

The military attacked Fano [militiamen] sleeping near the camp's water sites ... just 20 meters from us. The fighting started at 10 a.m. and lasted until the afternoon. The forces were

fighting on either side of the camp with refugees in the middle. Children were crying. We were all lying on the floor scared.

The clashes have led to a rapidly worsening humanitarian situation inside Aftit camp and continued deprivation at the Metemma transit center. While refugees in Aftit received food on September 9, refugees in the Metemma transit center said they had only received biscuits in early October, and limited other [assistance](#) since their arrival in late August.

Recommendations

To all warring parties in Amhara:

- Uphold international humanitarian law prohibitions on attacks against civilians, including refugees, and respect the humanitarian nature of refugee camps.
- Take all feasible measures to minimize harm to civilians, including refugees in camps.
- Facilitate delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians, including refugees.

To the Ethiopian government:

- Immediately provide, with international support, humanitarian assistance to Sudanese refugees, and ensure that they have adequate access to food, shelter, and health care.
- Ensure refugee safety, including protection from armed groups; prohibit forced returns of refugees; and take measures to assist all refugees in conflict-affected areas of Ethiopia to voluntarily and safely relocate to other parts of the country.
- Provide refugees in conflict-affected areas exceptions to the permit requirements in Ethiopia's "[Directive No. 01/2019](#) to Determine Conditions for Movement and Residence of Refugees Outside of Camps," by granting them freedom of movement and the right to work outside conflict-affected zones or inclusion in the urban assistance program.
- Investigate attacks and other abuses against refugees, including apparent involuntary returns of Sudanese refugees to Sudan on August 21, and appropriately hold those responsible for abuses to account.

To Ethiopia's international partners:

- Increase support to the refugee response, to ensure adequate emergency assistance, including medical care, food, and shelter.
- Support the Ethiopian government to enable voluntary relocation of refugees in conflict-affected areas, and urge that relocations and the establishment of any new refugee camps prioritizes the protection needs of refugees, and is subject to robust security assessments.
- Support the Ethiopian government to ensure freedom of movement for refugees, including by granting permission for out-of-camp residency to refugees in conflict-affected areas.

