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Ethiopia: Returned Tigrayans Detained, Abused

Saudi Arabia Should Stop Deporting Tigrayan Migrants to Ethiopia
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Ethiopian migrants returned from Saudi Arabia arrive at Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on July 7, 2021. © 2021 Minasse Wondimu Hailu/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

(Beirut) – Ethiopian authorities have arbitrarily detained, mistreated, and forcibly disappeared thousands of ethnic Tigrayans recently deported from Saudi Arabia, Human Rights Watch said today. Saudi Arabia should stop holding Tigrayans in abhorrent conditions and deporting them to Ethiopia, and instead help the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide them with international protection.

Ethiopian authorities have transferred Tigrayan deportees from Saudi Arabia to reception centers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, where some were being unlawfully held. The Ethiopian authorities have also apprehended Tigrayan deportees at checkpoints on the roads to Tigray or at the Semera airport in the Afar region and transferred them to detention facilities in Afar or southern Ethiopia.

"Tigrayan migrants who have experienced horrific abuse in Saudi custody are being locked up in detention facilities upon returning to Ethiopia," said Nadia Hardman, refugee and migrant rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Saudi Arabia should offer protection to Tigrayans at risk, while Ethiopia should release all arbitrarily detained Tigrayan deportees."

Various factors, including unemployment and other economic difficulties, drought, and human rights abuses, have driven hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians to migrate over the past decade, traveling by boat across the Red Sea and then by land through Yemen to Saudi Arabia.

In January 2021, the Ethiopian government announced it would cooperate in the repatriation of 40,000 of its nationals detained in Saudi Arabia, beginning with a 1,000 a week. Forty percent of the returnees from Saudi Arabia between November 2020 and June 2021 were Tigrayan.

Deportations increased significantly between late June and mid-July, with over 30,000 reportedly deported. The surge in repatriations coincided with an increase in profiling, arbitrary detentions, and forcible disappearances of Tigrayans by Ethiopian authorities in Addis Ababa following the withdrawal of Ethiopian federal forces from the Tigray region and an expansion of the Tigray conflict.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 23 Tigrayans – 20 men and 3 women – who were deported from Saudi Arabia between December 2020 and September 2021, with the majority deported between June and August 2021, and subsequently detained in Ethiopia between April and September. Deportees were held in facilities throughout Ethiopia: in centers in Addis Ababa; in Semera, Afar region; in Shone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region; and in Jimma, Oromia region. Human Rights Watch sent letters with queries to the Ethiopian National Disaster Risk Management Commission, the Federal Police Commission, the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington, DC, the Saudi Arabian Human Rights Council, and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Interior, but has received no responses.



Map showing the different locations where Tigrayan deportees are being detained in Ethiopia. Graphic: © 2021 Human Rights Watch

As Ethiopian authorities conducted mass sweeps and arrests of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa in July, some deportees interviewed said that after initially being allowed freedom of movement in the Addis centers they were not permitted to leave. Other deportees who tried to make their way home to Tigray were apprehended and forcibly disappeared at regional detention facilities where Federal and Afar regional police assaulted them or beat other Tigrayan deportees with rubber or wooden rods.

Deportees said that conditions became progressively more restrictive and abusive. In the Semera center in mid-September, a new Afar security force, wearing gray and black uniforms, arrived and beat deportees, purportedly because detainees spent too much time in the toilets. “Two days ago, they [Afar special police] came and beat many of us,” said a 23-year-old deportee. “I am injured, and my leg and head are swollen. They beat us severely. They said, ‘You belong to the TPLF [Tigray People’s Liberation Front].’”

Most interviewees said they were unable to speak with family members to let them know where they were, and some believed their relatives still thought they were in Saudi Arabia. All said the federal police failed to provide any legal justification for their arrest and subsequent detention.

The interviewees said that before Saudi Arabia deported them, they spent from six months to six years in formal and informal detention facilities across Saudi Arabia, including in Abha, Hadda, Jizan, and Jeddah. They experienced beatings and overcrowding, and uniformly described terrible sanitation and inadequate bedding, food, water, and medical care. Deplorable detention conditions for migrants in Saudi Arabia is a longstanding problem.

They were permitted no time outside and suffered serious skin problems from the unhygienic conditions. All said that prison guards beat them or other detainees with plastic or rubber-coated metal rods, including if they complained about conditions. They said guards would remove them from their cells, force them to strip naked, and stand or kneel as they were beaten.

Nearly all interviewees said that Saudi authorities had arrested and detained them because of their irregular immigration status, but that the authorities never provided legal justifications for their detention nor allowed them to get a lawyer or challenge their detention. Prolonged detention without access to judicial review is considered arbitrary and violates international law.

The Ethiopian authorities' detention of thousands of Tigrayan deportees from Saudi Arabia without informing their families of their arrest or whereabouts amounts to enforced disappearance, which also violates international law. The authorities should immediately account for all Tigrayans in custody and release all those who have not been credibly charged with a crime. All those detained should have immediate access to legal counsel and their families.

Saudi Arabia should halt the deportation of all Tigrayans to Ethiopia because of the risk they face of persecution. Customary international law prohibits sending people to a country where they face a real risk of persecution or torture. Saudi Arabia should provide UNHCR with full and unfettered access to detained migrants to assess any claim for refugee status and work with UNHCR to facilitate the resettlement of Tigrayan refugees.

“Ethiopian authorities are persecuting Tigrayans deported from Saudi Arabia by wrongfully detaining and forcibly disappearing them,” Hardman said. “Saudi Arabia should stop contributing to

this abuse by ending the forced return of Tigrayans to Ethiopia and allowing them to seek asylum or resettlement in third countries.”

Ethiopian Conflict

In November 2020, an armed conflict started between the Ethiopian federal government and its allied forces against forces affiliated with the region’s former ruling party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Since then, rights groups and the media have documented numerous abuses, including large-scale massacres, indiscriminate attacks, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests, forcible expulsions, pillage, destruction of civilian property, and blocking of humanitarian relief.

On November 4, Ethiopia’s parliament passed a six-month nationwide state of emergency, which grants the government far-reaching authority to arrest and detain people based on “reasonable suspicion” of cooperation with “terrorist groups” without a court warrant or judicial oversight. In May, Ethiopia’s parliament had designated the TPLF as a terrorist group.

Saudi Arabia Detention of Ethiopian Migrants

Official Saudi statistics indicate that over 6.3 million migrants are formally working in the private sector in Saudi Arabia, especially in energy and service jobs. Saudi Arabia has carried out regular sweeps of undocumented migrant workers, including major arrest campaigns beginning in November 2013 and August 2017. The Interior Ministry indicated that between August 12 and December 8, 2021, the authorities detained over 265,000 people in violation of residency, labor, and border security laws.

Human Rights Watch in 2019 identified approximately 10 prisons and detention centers in Saudi Arabia in which migrants were held for various periods in overcrowded, unsanitary, and abusive conditions. In August 2020, three detention centers were identified in Jizan and Jeddah provinces where thousands of Ethiopian migrants were being held in abysmal conditions after being expelled from northern Yemen the previous April. In December 2020, Human Rights Watch identified a deportation center in Riyadh holding hundreds of migrant workers in degrading conditions, most of them Ethiopians.

Tigrayan deportees interviewed uniformly described horrendous conditions in formal and informal detention centers in the Saudi Arabian cities of Abha, Hadda, Jizan, and Jeddah. All said the Saudi authorities kept them in cramped, unsanitary rooms with hundreds of other migrants for months and years on end. Most said they had been detained for over a year. They did not have enough room to all lie down at the same time, so some slept during the day and others at night. All said either that guards had assaulted them or that they had witnessed guards beating other detainees.

For security reasons, all names are pseudonyms.

Kaleb, a 24-year-old Tigrayan, traveled to Saudi Arabia from Ethiopia using smugglers in April 2019 in search of job opportunities. A year after he arrived, Saudi security forces in Riyadh arrested him in a house raid and detained him for more than a year. He said that the detention center “was a difficult place”:

So many people suffered. They [prison guards] turned on an air conditioning unit that released very cold air until we were freezing and suffered. Then when we started screaming so the guards would turn it off, it got hot again. The guards would entertain themselves by doing this. We tried to convince the guards to stop this, but they didn’t.

He said there were 300 people in the cell and so all could not sleep at the same time but slept in turns: “We slept under a flooding toilet. Some of the toilets were broken and would leak to where we slept.”

He also described the abuse by the guards:

The beating was an everyday thing. One day, the guards beat me with a rubber stick so severely. I was being transferred to another room. There was no reason, it was just because I was standing at the front of the line. The result is that my body was swollen.

After 14 months in the Riyadh detention center, Kaleb was transferred to Shmeisei deportation center in Jeddah.

Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, Enforced Disappearance in Ethiopia

Addis Ababa Centers

The Tigrayan deportees interviewed said that once they arrived at Addis Ababa Bole International Airport from Saudi Arabia, Ethiopian federal police and representatives from humanitarian organizations met them and transported them by bus to government-run centers in Addis Ababa. At the centers deportees have access to food, water, toilets, and showers, and are given 1,000 to 2,000 birr (US\$20 to \$40) and a place to stay in the centers for one to two nights, though they are not always allowed to leave after this initial stay.

The government operates at least eight centers housing Tigrayan deportees in various Addis Ababa neighborhoods. Human Rights Watch spoke with deportees who said that an estimated 1,000 deportees are in Shiro Meda, 400 in Wosen, and up to 800 in Megenagna at any one time.

Several said the federal police at the Addis reception center told them that they could not leave the center unless they had a relative in the capital who could collect them, though some were allowed to leave after a few days. It is unclear why others were only permitted to leave if they had a relative to sponsor them.

The federal police moved several interviewees without a sponsor to another government center in the Shiro Meda area. While men and women were initially held together but in separate rooms at Shiro Meda, as of mid-September, the authorities had transferred about 400 women to a facility in Wosen on the outskirts of Addis.

Two deportees said that on November 21 federal police entered the Shiro Meda center at midnight and took at least 150 young male deportees by bus to Jimma in the Oromia region to a rudimentary detention facility, where they were forced to work by “local militia,” wearing dark green uniforms, in the nearby coffee farms for up to seven hours a day without pay. Tekle, 27, described the conditions in Jimma:

They [local militia] warned us not to speak Tigrinya in this area. We are being forced to work in the coffee farms all day without food. When we get back to the shelter, they lock us in and we are only given boiled maize to eat. We sleep in a simple house, we sleep on the floor, with no blanket, no mattress. There are insects on the floor that bite us.

Semera and Shone Detention Facilities

In July, the Tigray conflict expanded into the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions, with an escalation of fighting in the Afar region in late July and August leading to large-scale displacement in the region. Fourteen Tigrayan returnees said that between April and August they were allowed to leave the Addis reception center and tried to return to Tigray either by flying to Semera airport in Afar region, or by bus. Many cited the arrests and disappearances of Tigrayans in Addis as a reason why they wanted to leave the capital. Federal and Afar police together or separately intercepted them at Semera airport or at six checkpoints in the Afar region. They said the police held them at the checkpoint or at makeshift detention sites for one to three days, then forced them onto buses and transported them to detention facilities in Semera or to Shone in southern Ethiopia.

Several said they were held without food and with limited water. Berhe, a 34-year-old Tigrayan deported from Saudi Arabia in July, spent two days at a center in Addis and then tried to travel home to Tigray:

At a checkpoint near Logiya [Afar region], the federal police stopped the bus. They got into the bus, checked our identity documents [*laisser passer* provided by the Ethiopian embassy in Saudi Arabia]... and took our mobile phones. We stayed in the checkpoint for three days and three nights. In the bus for all that time. The checkpoint is far out of town. We had no food or water. On the fourth day we were taken to Awash [Afar region].

...We didn't know where we were going and we couldn't contact our families.

He spent another night in the bus at a checkpoint in Awash before being taken to a detention facility in Shone, where he remained five months later.

Trhas, a 33-year-old Tigrayan woman who was deported from Saudi Arabia in December 2020, said that federal police stopped her at a checkpoint at Awash Sebat, Afar region, in April, put her in a bus, and took her to a "military camp" near the checkpoint where she was held with up to 700 other Tigrayan deportees. After two days they took her to Shone. She said:

It took us one day to travel to the South [to Shone]. We spent another night in the bus. There was no food or water, it was a very difficult two days. We asked the federal police for food and water and the toilet, but we were beaten if we left our seats. They said, "Bandits don't need food." The police

stopped the bus in some towns to buy food and drinks for themselves. When this happened, the male passengers left their seats, and the police beat them using something like a wire in their hands.

Hagos, a 24-year-old Tigrayan deported from Saudi Arabia in June, traveled by plane to Semera directly after his arrival at the Addis reception center. He said:

The [federal] police stopped us at the airport in Semera and checked our mobile phones to see what photos we had. If they found a Tigrayan flag or anything related to the [Tigray] situation they would keep the mobile phone. We [Tigrayan deportees] were collected in one corner. They said we couldn't travel to Tigray; it was not safe. We were taken to a big compound in Semera. There were a lot of people already there. Everyone was Tigrayan and the majority were deportees from Saudi Arabia. Some were also from Addis, people who had been detained in Addis and taken there.

Hagos spent a rainy night in the open courtyard of a compound. "We were soaked by the rain," he said. The police then took him and others to Shone. They asked the police to release them before they arrived in Shone: "We said, 'Even if there is a war in Tigray, we want to go.' They said, 'No.'"

Mistreatment in Addis Centers and Regional Detention Facilities

Tigrayan deportees sent to centers in Addis generally had greater freedom of movement than in the regional facilities, which served as detention centers. In Megenagna in Addis, deportees interviewed said they could leave, but chose not to for fear of being arrested on the streets. Habtom, 35, said, "We are allowed to go out, but we do not because we are scared we will be arrested. We will stay [in the center] until we are forced to leave."

Deportees in Shiro Meda said they needed permission from the federal police to leave, and those in Wosen, a facility for women, said they needed sponsorship from a relative.

The Shone and Semera detention centers had much harsher conditions. Deportees in Semera said the Afar police who ran the facility only allowed them to leave their rooms for 30 minutes in the morning and late afternoon for water and to use the toilet. Daniel, 40, who was deported from Saudi Arabia in August, described the Semera facility:

It looks like a warehouse built with concrete hollow blocks. Inside there are no mattresses and we sleep on the floor. It is a big compound with a long fence, guarded by many [Afar] police. We are

not allowed to leave. We can only walk inside the compound where we stay all night. There are women and children here too, we are really suffering. Except for 6 to 10 people who are from Semera [town], we are more than 800 deportees from Saudi Arabia.

Deportees in Shone could only leave their rooms for limited periods for food, water, and the toilet, but for longer periods than in Semera.

The deportees in Shone, Semera, and Shiro Meda said that federal or Afar police had assaulted them in detention or that they had witnessed police officers beating other Tigrayan deportees with rubber or wooden rods.

Daniel said that federal police intercepted him at the Semera airport on his way to Tigray and took him to the Semera detention facility. There, Afar police beat detainees, effectively accused them of being Tigrayan fighters by referring to them as “junta,” a term the Ethiopian government has used for the TPLF. He said: “There are beatings, it is even worse than Saudi Arabia. The police beat us, abuse us, and insult us. ... I was beaten. They beat us with rubber sticks that they carry with them. Sometimes they beat us with wooden sticks. Every day, it is normal.”

Goitom, 22, was intercepted in Awash Sebat in Afar, after being deported from Saudi Arabia in August, and taken to the Shone detention facility. He said the federal police ran the center:

There are beatings...Almost every day there is a beating, some because there is a disturbance. When the federal police want to lock down the facility and people go to the toilet at the last minute, they are beaten. There is no serious injury, but people are beaten. Different police use different things to beat people. Some use their hands or military boots.

In early November, the federal government passed a broad state of emergency. Thousands of ethnic Tigrayans were again swept up in mass, arbitrary arrests in Addis Ababa. On November 21 at about midnight, seven armed federal police officers entered the Shiro Meda facility in Addis Ababa and picked up 100 Tigrayan deportees, all young men. The police forced them to walk to a nearby police station. A witness said that the police caught several men who tried to escape during the forced walk and beat them. The men spent the night outside in the cold. The next morning, the police forced them to board three buses and drove them to Jimma, in southwest Ethiopia. Andom, a 32-year-old man now at Jimma, said he and the other 150 deportees were being forced by “local

militia leaders” to work on the coffee farms, a half hour walk from the rudimentary detention facility where they were held.

Andom said:

We work six to seven hours every day. We have to pick a minimum of one kilo of coffee beans per day. We have to work hard and cover a large area to pick enough coffee beans. We don’t get water while we work. There are three people who are sick now because of this.

Detention Facility Locations

Based on satellite imagery, videos, and witness accounts, Human Rights Watch identified two facilities – in the towns of Semera and Shone – that are most likely used to detain Tigrayan deportees.

Semera, Afar Region

Human Rights Watch analysis determined that a likely detention facility for Tigrayans is located at a compound less than two kilometers north of the Semera airport.

Interviewees said that they were being held in a location next to the only church in Semera, near what they believed was a military compound. A video posted on Facebook on August 21, filmed from inside a walled compound, shows what appears to be five people being forced to roll across the ground.

Human Rights Watch identified the likely location of the compound by matching the landmarks visible in the video with satellite imagery but could not confirm the date the video was recorded. A review of historical satellite imagery of the site confirms that the compound was built in early April 2021, leading Human Rights Watch to narrow down the date to sometime between early April and August 21, when the video was posted online.

On October 7, rows of military vehicles inside what looks like a military compound are visible on satellite imagery, dozens of meters from the possible detention center.



As described by interviewees, Human Rights Watch identified a church next to a compound in the town of Semera, Afar region. A video posted on Facebook on August 21, 2021 depicting apparent mistreatment of people matches interviewee accounts of the likely location of a detention facility. Right: Satellite imagery taken 7 October 2021 © 2021 Planet Labs Inc. Left: Image stills taken from a video widely shared online recorded by an unknown person.

Shone, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region

Human Rights Watch, analyzing satellite imagery and witness accounts, identified the likely detention facility as Shone Agricultural College at Wachamo University in Shone. The layout and features are consistent with descriptions from interviewees.



Based on interviews, Human Rights Watch identified this location in Shone Agricultural College of Wachamo University as the likely facility used to detain Tigrayan deportees in Shone town, in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region of Ethiopia. The annotated graphic corroborates descriptions given during interviews with landmarks visible in satellite imagery. Satellite imagery: 20 October 2021. © 2021 CNES / Airbus. Source: Google Earth

Recommendations

To the Ethiopian Government

- Immediately inform families of Tigrayan and other detainees of their relatives' whereabouts, and permit access to detainees by lawyers and family members.
- Promptly and unconditionally release Tigrayan and other detainees who have not been charged with a recognizable criminal offense.
- End the ethnic profiling of Tigrayans, including the routine detention of arriving Tigrayans deported from Saudi Arabia.
- Ensure that all official reception centers and detention facilities meet international standards; shut all informal detention facilities.
- Impartially investigate and discipline or prosecute as appropriate all officials implicated in mistreating detainees.

- End the use of Tigrayan deportees for forced labor and release everyone detained for that purpose.

To the Saudi Government

- Use migration detention only as an exceptional measure of last resort; release detainees who have not been brought promptly before a judge to determine the legal basis or necessity for their detention.
- Ensure that migrant detention and deportation centers meet international standards.
- Impartially investigate and discipline or prosecute as appropriate all officials implicated in mistreating detainees.
- Stop deporting Tigrayans to Ethiopia because of the real risk of persecution they face.
- Ensure UNHCR has full access to assess anyone claiming refugee status.
- Facilitate the resettlement of refugees identified by UNHCR as needing resettlement.

To Concerned Governments

- Increase resettlement places for Tigrayan refugees in Saudi Arabia.
- Expand complementary pathways for Tigrayans detained in Saudi Arabia to leave in safety and dignity.

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