
THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR) IN ETHIOPIAN REFUGEES DURING THE ETHIOPIA-TIGRAY CONFLICT FROM 2018 TO 2021

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Abstract : As one of the international organizations, UNHCR has a role in helping global society in humanitarian areas, especially refugees worldwide. Internally displaced people (IDPs) in Ethiopia become one of the targets for humanitarian access that are affected by the conflict between the Ethiopia federal government ruled by Abiy Ahmed as Primes Minister the Tigray regional that was dominated by Tigray's People Liberation Front (TPLF). The situation in the Ethiopian government changed after the transition of Abiy Ahmed. And then the conflict began after it was triggered by the TPLF when Tigray held its regional general election after Abiy Ahmed decided to postpone the general election. As a result, both actors try to confront each other with their troops to take over the cities in Tigray. The Eritrean troops supported the Ethiopian government in human rights violations as one of their weapons that caused fear among the Ethiopian societies. The fear of being the next victim made the Ethiopian societies flee to another region in Ethiopia and become internally displaced people (IDPs). This research tries to research the role of the UNHCR in helping Ethiopian IDPs and why this refugee case needs international attention. To help the arrangement process, this research uses case-based qualitative methodology, international organization theory by Kelly Kate Pease, and human security as concepts. The result of the research found that UNHCR's role as an international organization in collaboration with other institutions and national and international organizations to assist IDPs all over the region can be classified as the role of problem-solving and aid provider.

Key Words: *Ethiopia Conflict, TPLF, Abiy Ahmed, UNHCR, Internally Displaced People (IDPs)*

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INTRODUCTION

International organizations are one of the actors in the field of International Relations that, in their development, play a crucial role in the dynamics of international politics. The role of international organizations is complex, as they serve as platforms for various actors, including states, institutions, and individuals, to compete. International

organizations can also function as independent actors competing to apply values, norms, and regulations within the international community.

Cliver Archer, as explained in the book "*Pengantar Ilmu Hubungan Internasional*" by Anak Agung Banyu Perwita and Yanyan Mochamad Yani, defines international organizations as a formal and enduring structure formed through the agreement of international organization members, whether governmental or non-governmental. These organizations consist of two or more members with the common goal of pursuing shared interests (Perwita, 2005).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is an international organization established on January 1, 1951, by the United Nations (UN) (UNHCR, 2022). In its mandate, the UNHCR focuses on addressing refugees worldwide. According to the 1951 convention and protocol, a refugee is defined as someone without nationality, residing outside their usual country of residence due to life-threatening events (UNHCR, 2022). They are either unable or unwilling to return to that country because of these events, often rooted in political issues.

One African country currently facing political issues is Ethiopia, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, one of Africa's oldest countries and the only African nation never colonized, has been a destination for refugees in the African region. This is due to its open-door policy and the provision of humanitarian aid to protect seekers and refugees within its borders (Rahmatika, 2021). Ethiopia, as the largest country hosting refugees primarily due to conflicts and economic crises, has been a sought-after destination for asylum seekers.

However, the situation changed in 2020 when Ethiopian citizens became refugees in other countries due to a civil conflict, particularly in the Tigray region. This civil conflict resulted from political transitions within the Ethiopian government. The political transition occurred when Abiy Ahmed was appointed Prime Minister in April 2018, changing Ethiopia's political landscape. Previously dominant in the Ethiopian government, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) played a significant role in establishing a federal government structure with ten regional administrations led by specific ethnic groups.

The Ethiopian population perceived the political situation, dominated by the TPLF, as an obstacle to democracy, leading to political and economic challenges. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in his inaugural speech, announced political reforms, unity, and reconciliation. He pledged to address Ethiopia's border issues with Eritrea by communicating with the Eritrean government and politicians inside and outside Ethiopia. This promising speech was well-received by the Ethiopian population.

However, tensions arose in Ethiopian politics, especially with the TPLF, which attempted to oppose Abiy's government by holding its independent general elections in September 2020. Abiy asserted that the general elections were postponed due to the Covid-19

pandemic, which was initially planned for March 2020. TPLF won 98% of the seats in Tigray, while the federal government won 2%, according to the independent elections (BBC, 2020). Abiy considered these elections illegal and the results invalid. TPLF argued that the federal government's term should have ended in October and accused the federal government of collaborating with TPLF's old enemy, Eritrea, to subdue the Tigray people (Blanchard 2021)

The tension between Abiy's government and TPLF escalated, leading to the use of military force on November 4, 2020, after Abiy announced that TPLF had launched a military operation against the federal government in various Ethiopian regions. He categorized this military attack as a high-level act of betrayal. Additionally, Abiy accused TPLF of engaging in a conflict involving religion and ethnicity in Ethiopia, making it appear uncontrollable (Blanchard 2021).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is an International Organization

As one of the actors in International Relations, the term "international organization" lacks a unified understanding and scope. International organizations often refer to organizations formed by governments, although there are also non-governmental international organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Suwardi, 2004). As stated by Dijkzeul and Beigbeder, "Sometimes the term international organizations is used to include multinational corporations, bilateral organizations, multilateral organizations, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)." (Amici, 2020) Therefore, based on the above definition of international organizations, it can be concluded that international organizations encompass states, multinational corporations, bilateral and multilateral organizations, and non-state entities authorized to play a role in international political affairs.

International organizations not only play a role in helping resolve issues but also have various functions, according to Kelly Kate Pease, adapted based on the principles and nature of international organizations. From a liberal perspective, Pease explains that states are not the sole actors, and state and non-state actors are equally important in international relations. Moreover, issues on the international agenda are not limited to security and military concerns but also include social, economic, environmental, and humanitarian issues (Pease, 2019). The International Organization theory is aptly used to analyze the role of the UNHCR as an international organization in handling internal refugees in Ethiopia affected by the conflict.

With Pease's explanation that international organizations play an equally important role as states, he outlines five roles that international organizations fulfill: Collective Act

Mechanism, Common Global Market, Problem Solving, Capacity Building, and Aid Provider. The first role, the Collective Act Mechanism, can be described as the international organization's mediator in a collective issue involving multiple parties, ranging from economic to humanitarian problems.

The second role international organisations hold is the Common Global Market, where Pease explains that international organizations promote global economic prosperity and well-being. Building on liberal understanding, Pease emphasizes that economic well-being can be achieved through increased individual engagement in the global market.

The third role is Problem Solving, where international organizations reduce the potential for conflict, violence, and other issues through values and norms conveyed to society, fostering peace among conflicting parties. Additionally, international organizations promote and protect the human rights of communities (Pease, 2019).

The fourth role held by international organizations is Capacity Building, facilitated by Multinational Corporations (MNCs). According to Pease, MNCs can unite communities through the common global market, providing employment, various industries, managerial skills, and new technology to the community in every MNC activity.

According to Kelly-Kate Pease, the final role is Aid Provider, where international organizations assist "international political victims" such as those affected by poverty, refugees, and communities facing losses due to natural disasters, conflicts, wars, and medical epidemics. In their role, international organizations can provide immediate assistance to victims impacted by the issues above (Pease, 2019).

METHOD

According to John W. Creswell in his book "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches," research design is a series of research plans and procedures consisting of assumptions about a phenomenon up to detailed methods, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative research approach, as defined by Creswell, is used to explore and understand the meaning of an object, whether it is an individual, group, or human problem. The collected data, whether written or visual, will be presented in descriptions according to the observed phenomenon. The author chose to use a qualitative research approach because the social relations of a country and the state of society are more challenging to quantify and tend to be abstract and less structured. The research findings are interpreted and analyzed based on the phenomena encountered in the field. Thus, in qualitative research, the results can change over time due to the uncertain nature of the research object (Creswell, 2014).

1. **Preparing and Organizing Data:** In this stage, the author will record all the data collected from the documents, then sort and organize the required data into specific sections according to the relevant topics.
2. **Reading and Reviewing All Data:** This stage requires the author to interpret the previously found data, such as the main ideas presented in articles or reports, the credibility of the topics from the found readings, and the meaning of images supporting the research.
3. **Coding:** Coding, as defined by Rossman & Rallis in Creswell's book, involves organizing data by categorizing descriptive and visual data into the same categories. Manual coding produces descriptions of information and overall data for analysis.
4. **Advance how the description and these will be represented in the qualitative narrative:** In this stage, a narrative approach is often used to explain findings in the analysis. The explanation is carried out by discussing related topics categorized as descriptive data, tables, and images.
5. **Interpreting the Meaning of Data:** In this final stage, the author interprets the meaning of each piece of data to find answers to the research questions. The author provides interpretations backed by the studies undertaken, experiences, history, or comparisons with previous findings in the literature review and used theories.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Refugees according to UNHCR

The UNHCR, one of the government international organizations established on December 14, 1950, by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), aims to address refugee issues worldwide. Meanwhile, the definition of refugees in the 1967 protocol is interpreted as individuals who genuinely fear persecution based on reasons such as race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. They are outside their country of nationality and cannot or, due to this fear, are unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country. Alternatively, someone who is stateless and is outside the country where they usually reside, as a result of the events mentioned, cannot or, due to this fear, is unwilling to return to that country.

UNHCR identifies various community groups that fall under the criteria of refugees requiring international protection by UNHCR in a particular region. These groups include mandate refugees, convention refugees, refugees under regional instruments, special classification under national law, returning refugees, and internally displaced people (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2017).

The Ethiopia-Tigray Conflict

The conflict between Ethiopia and Tigray fundamentally began with a political transition in April 2018, when Abiy Ahmed assumed the position of Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Abiy Ahmed's appointment followed the resignation of former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn on February 15, 2018, under pressure from his political party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the public (Fisher, 2018). Abiy Ahmed, belonging to the Oromo ethnic group, raised hopes for positive changes in Ethiopia.

Abiy Ahmed's commitment to transforming Ethiopia was expressed in his acceptance speech on April 2, 2018, during his inauguration as Prime Minister. In his speech, Abiy outlined several aspects of enhancing democratic space, ensuring good governance, justice, and law enforcement, resolving conflicts with Eritrea, and improving education and the economy (Ethioembassy, 2018).

Abiy Ahmed successfully realized his ambitions, culminating in a peace declaration by signing the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with Eritrean President Afwerki in Asmara in July 2018. This peace agreement marked the end of a nearly two-decade-long conflict characterized by a period of "no war, no peace." (Alcalde, 2018) Abiy Ahmed's decision to develop Ethiopia strained his relationship with the TPLF party. The situation worsened during the global Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated the suspension of various activities.

When Covid-19 reached Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed's government decided to postpone the sixth General Election indefinitely, which was initially scheduled for August 29, 2020. The TPLF rejected the postponement, viewing it as an attempt to extend Abiy Ahmed's and his associates' power, which they deemed inconsistent with the Ethiopian constitution (Blanchard , 2005)

The Tigray regional government proceeded with holding elections on September 9, 2020, with the TPLF winning 98.2% of the vote, securing 152 out of 190 regional parliamentary seats (Blanchard , 2005).

Tensions escalated when the federal government accused the TPLF of attacking the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, on November 4, 2020. Ethiopia claimed that Tigray militants sought to steal military equipment and artillery from the northern Ethiopian command, which had protected the Tigray people for two decades (ethioembassy, 2022). In response to the military attack, Abiy Ahmed declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray, citing numerous casualties, martyrs, and property damage., The national authorities cut off Tigray's access to electricity, telephone services, and the internet. Abiy Ahmed accused TPLF forces of using uniforms similar to those of Eritrean forces to "implicate the Eritrean government in false claims of aggression against the Tigray people. BBC , (2022)"

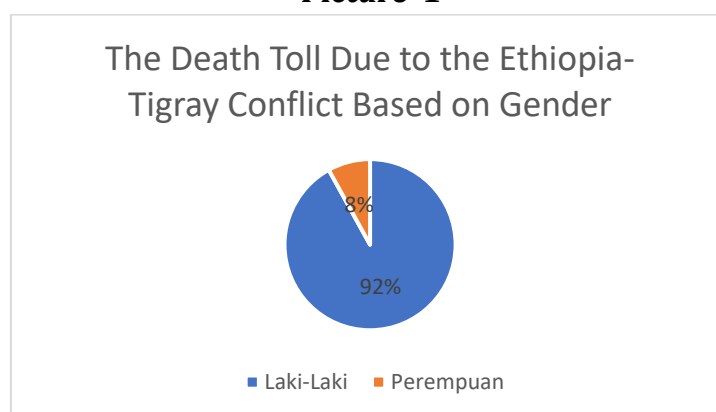
In response to the attack on a military camp in Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed declared the incident as a high-level betrayal. Subsequently, Abiy Ahmed initiated a military operation called "Law Enforcement Operations" to save the country and the region of Ethiopia from the circle of instability. The Ethiopia-Tigray Civil Conflict, which has been ongoing for nearly a year, has garnered global attention as tensions between the two parties escalate. However, this civil conflict became more complex with the discovery of reports of sexual violence against Tigray's girls and women by ENDF forces during the conflict.

The number of sexual violence incidents against girls and women in Tigray has been increasing. According to Plaut et al., between December 2020 and January 2021, there were 136 cases of sexual violence reported. Reuters reported that since the conflict began in November 2021, there have been at least 1300 cases of sexual violence, with the number expected to rise due to many unreported cases by international organizations and mass media (Nichols, 2022).

From the numerous testimonies of sexual violence victims, it is stated that the perpetrators are military forces from ENDF, Eritrea, and Amhara. The power struggle and territorial takeover of Tigray by Ethiopian federal forces, assisted by Amhara and Eritrean forces, involved not only sexual violence targeting girls and women in Tigray but also mass violence and killings of Tigray's men.

Mass killings by ENDF and Eritrean forces occurred concurrently with the takeover of territories in Tigray. Although the federal Ethiopian government denies mass killings, the Tigray community has directly witnessed Eritrean and ENDF forces shooting civilians on the streets, in churches, eateries, cafes, hotels, and even homes. Due to this conflict, there is no exact figure regarding the number of casualties in Ethiopia, especially Tigray. However, the recorded death toll until November 16, 2021, reached 3240, with 92% being men and the remaining 8% women. (Nichols, 2021) (Bempt, Annys, Negash, Ghekiere, & Nyssen., 2021)

Picture 1



(Source: Bempt, dkk)

The deaths of Ethiopian civilians due to the conflict, predominantly involving males, are motivated by the desire of the ENDF and Eritrean forces to eliminate Tigray

forces and fighters, including the future generation of Tigray forces (Bempt, Annys, Negash, Ghekiere, & Nyssen., 2021). This strategy aims to reduce the male population in Tigray to hinder the formation of armed groups in the future. The victims of the killings by the ENDF and Eritrean military forces include males of all ages, ranging from 9 years old to those above 90 years old.

Role of UNHCR in Internal Displacement in Ethiopia

In assisting to manage internal displacement in Ethiopia, UNHCR strives to meet the needs of conflict-affected communities across the region. However, limited access poses a significant challenge for UNHCR in delivering aid to every internally displaced person (IDP) in Ethiopia. Throughout 2021, UNHCR assisted 1.7 million internal refugees by providing necessary aid. According to data from the UNHCR website, this assistance was documented from February 11 to 17 and continued until December 2021. In February, UNHCR traveled to Mekelle to assess the number of IDPs, checked the UNHCR office in Mekelle, and provided protection and humanitarian assistance to internal refugees.

In April 2021, UNHCR released a progress report indicating protection efforts for 6,780 families at SMA Shiraro and Shiraro University on April 21. UNHCR recorded at least 8,000 internal refugees scheduled to receive Core Relief Items (CRIs) in the shelter and non-food items sector. However, the specific region for CRI distribution was not mentioned. Collaborating with Action for the Needy in Ethiopia (ANE), Innovative Humanitarian Solutions (IHS), and Development Expertise Centre (DEC), UNHCR constructed 150 protection sites for internal refugees in Seba Kare.

As the conflict escalated with Tigray military operations in June to recapture Mekelle and other cities, tension increased in displacement areas across Ethiopia. In response, UNHCR took protective measures by installing "No-Gun Sign" banners in Tigray and Shire and expanding protection services with an additional 40 desks. UNHCR protected 9,000 unaccompanied or separated children and focused on shelter and CRIs by distributing them to 14,431 internal refugee families in Tigray, encompassing approximately 71,473 individuals (UNHCR, 2022).

UNHCR's assistance to internal refugees in Ethiopia is not based on a specific plan or policy. Instead, UNHCR collaborates with local organizations and governments such as OCHA, Innovative Humanitarian Solutions (IHS), Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BoLSA), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and others to map and record internal refugees. This collaboration involves problem-solving activities, addressing issues like refugee placement, documenting newly arrived refugees, and recording the needs of internal refugees. UNHCR and its partners engage in joint problem-solving efforts to provide services to internally displaced populations across different regions.

UNHCR plays a crucial role in conflict resolution by leveraging shared values and norms to promote peace among involved parties. As an aid provider, UNHCR also adheres to the

principles outlined by Kelly Kate Pease, offering assistance to "international political victims" like refugees and conflict-affected communities. UNHCR prioritizes aid for the needs of internal refugees in Ethiopia, providing shelter relocations, Core Relief Items (CRIs), and humanitarian aid, including non-food items essential for daily life.

The Ethiopia-Tigray conflict occurring amidst the Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted internally displaced populations vulnerable to the virus. However, the UNHCR report does not detail the development of the internal displacement situation. As of October 2021, UNHCR has successfully vaccinated 6,107 internal refugees, with 2,807 having received the complete vaccine dosage.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analytical overview conducted by the author, it can be concluded that the issue of internal displacement in Ethiopia has become an international concern due to human rights violations committed by involved actors targeting the Ethiopian population, especially in Tigray, causing fear and anxiety among potential victims. The numerous human rights violations during the ongoing conflict and its continuation have led internal refugees to fear for their safety, prompting them to seek refuge in safer areas within Ethiopia, classifying them as internal refugees. The increasing number of internal refugees in Ethiopia each month has drawn the attention of the international community, particularly the international organization UNHCR, which addresses refugee issues.

As an international organization, UNHCR functions as both a problem solver and an aid provider—two of the five identified roles. As a problem solver, UNHCR advocates for enforcing human rights to the Ethiopian government, other involved actors, and internal refugees across Ethiopia. Providing protection services and counselling is considered part of the problem-solving efforts undertaken by UNHCR in collaboration with other partners. Moreover, UNHCR endeavours to ensure the safety of internal refugees who wish to return to their home regions.

Meanwhile, as an aid provider, UNHCR delivers essential assistance to internal refugees through Core Relief Items (CRIs), containing necessities such as bedding and soap, with an estimated total of over 108,484 packages distributed throughout 2021. UNHCR also establishes temporary protection sites for internal refugees to shelter from military attacks. Water tanks and sanitation facilities are built to meet the needs of internal refugees in Ethiopia. Vaccination assistance is provided to internal refugees, with 2,807 out of 6,107 receiving complete vaccine doses.

As an international organization, UNHCR collaborates with various partners, whether governmental or private institutions internationally, directly assisting individuals or internal refugees, without discrimination based on their settlement or regional origin. UNHCR focuses on providing comprehensive assistance to internal refugees affected by the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict, working collaboratively with other actors to ensure effective

aid delivery. Additionally, UNHCR ensures the protection of every individual internal refugee across all regions, offering various services, even though limited access in internal refugee areas throughout Ethiopia hinders its fulfilment of the roles of a collective act mechanism, capacity building, and a common global market. Nevertheless, UNHCR has fulfilled the three requirements during the refugee crisis: protection of refugees, daily necessities provision, and efforts towards finding solutions.

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