# Perspectives of Eritrean and Tigrayan Refugees on Return Post-Tigray War [1]

## Introduction

Previous studies have shown that very few refugees manage to return to their home countries after migrating. That has been the case for Eritrean refugees while the willingness of Tigrayan refugees to go back remains uncertain. Many Eritrean refugees, especially those in Libya, fear being forcibly sent back to Eritrea, even as they hope for a safe return. This study compares the views of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees on their potential return after the Tigray war, focusing on the factors that influence their decisions. Refugees describe situations in which human rights abuses, violence, impunity, and human trafficking were worsening and becoming normalized; yet despite this, they felt unable to return unless the situation would improve significantly.

## Research summary

The study compares the experiences of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees who fled to Sudan during the Tigray war. The analysis reveals significant differences in their baseline situations, the disturbances they faced, and their assessments of the new social systems they inhabit.

## Executive Summary

This study investigates the intention of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees to return to their home regions following the Tigray war. The results indicate a significant reluctance among both groups to return, amidst instability, human rights violations, and the threat of human trafficking. Refugees are stuck in situations in which such violence is worsening and becoming normalized; yet despite this, they felt unable to return unless the situation would improve significantly in their home countries.

### 1. Baseline & disturbance

- *Eritrean refugees*: Their baseline is characterized by systematic repression that is faced in Eritrea, including lack of rights, and forced indefinite national service. The Tigray war exacerbated their already dire circumstances, leading to abductions and forced returns to Eritrea as well as deployment into battle.

- *Tigrayan refugees*: Initially, the baseline was perceived as relatively stable. However, the war disrupted lives of Tigrayans in all aspects, leading to brutal violence, including sexual violence as an instrument of war, indiscriminate killings and ethnic targeting.
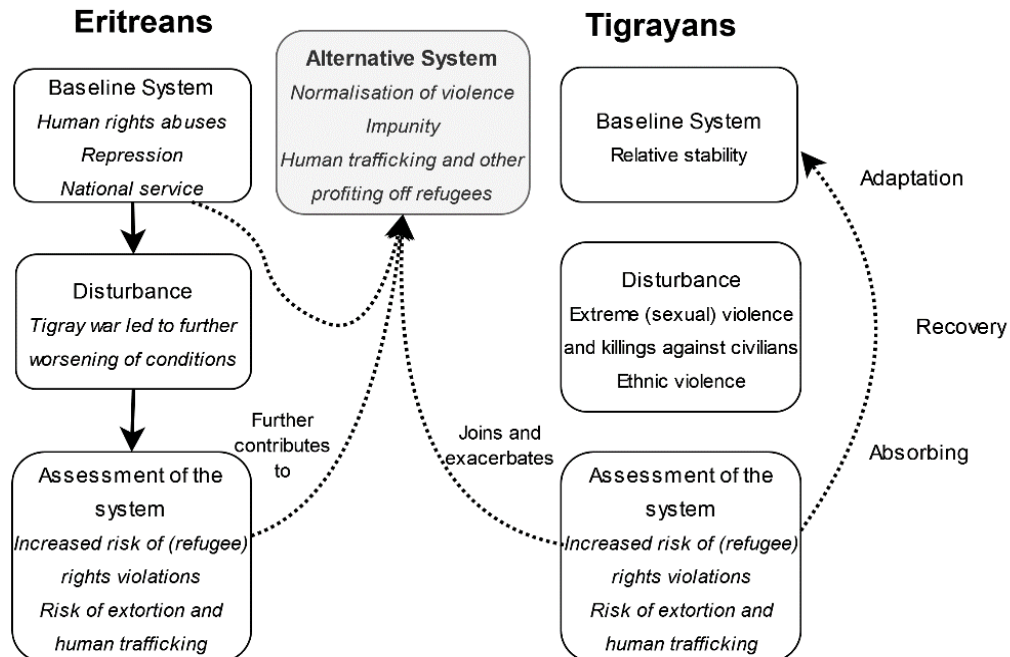
## 2. Conditions in Sudan

Both groups faced deteriorating conditions in refugee camps in Sudan, with increasing threats of human trafficking and greater exposure to human rights violations. Eritrean refugees reported that intermediaries of human traffickers were prompting large groups of youth to migrate further to Libya. Tigrayan refugees had been divided between groups that desired to return to Tigray and the lure of secondary migration to Europe via Libya.

## 3. Connectivity and communication black holes

Communication blackouts have further marginalized refugees, preventing them from contacting family members and accessing vital information about the situation in Tigray or their home regions. This lack of connectivity contributes to their feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

## 4. Reluctance to return

The study finds that Eritrean refugees do not aspire to return even though the conditions in the refugee camps were pointing towards increased impunity and extortion. Tigrayan refugees also expressed a collective unwillingness to return as the outbreak of war brought about an alternative system which does not align with their aspirations. Both groups seemed to have become part of an alternative system, though characterized by human trafficking and exploitation, making return increasingly unlikely.

## Recommendations for International Policymakers:

1. **Prioritize refugee protection**: Develop and implement policies that prioritize the safety and protection of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees, ensuring that their rights are upheld and that they are not forcibly returned to unsafe conditions.

2. **Enhance humanitarian assistance**: Increase humanitarian aid to refugee camps in Ethiopia, Sudan and surrounding regions, addressing immediate needs such as food, shelter, and medical care, while also providing support for mental health and trauma recovery.

3. **Address human trafficking**: Collaborate with other governments and NGOs to combat human trafficking networks that exploit vulnerable refugees, implementing measures to protect refugees from 'top level' traffickers and providing safe alternatives for migration.

4. **Facilitate information access**: Work to improve communication and information access for refugees, particularly in areas affected by communication blackouts or restrictions, to empower them with knowledge about their rights and available resources.

5. **Promote regional stability**: Engage in diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of instability in Eritrea and Ethiopia, focusing on long-term solutions that promote peace-building, security, and human rights in the region.

## Recommendations for EU Policymakers:

1. **Implement targeted sanctions**: Enforce targeted sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses against refugees, sending a clear message that violations will not be tolerated.

2. **Support resettlement programs**: Create and expand resettlement programs for Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees at risk, providing them with safe pathways to Europe and other safe countries.

3. **Foster collaboration with NGOs**: Partner with NGOs working on the ground to address the needs of refugees, leveraging their expertise and networks to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian responses.

4. **Raise awareness of refugee issues**: Launch awareness campaigns to inform the public and policymakers about the challenges faced by Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees, fostering a supportive environment for their protection and integration.

## Recommendations for NGOs:

1.  **Conduct further research**: Engage in ongoing research to better understand the dynamics of refugee willingness to return or further migrate, particularly in light of changing conditions in Tigray, and to inform advocacy efforts.

2.  **Provide legal and psychological support**: Offer legal assistance to refugees navigating asylum processes and provide psychological support to help them cope with trauma and uncertainty about their futures.

3.  **Create safe spaces**: Establish safe spaces within refugee camps where individuals can access information, support, and resources without fear of exploitation or trafficking.

4.  **Advocate for policy change**: Work with local and international partners to advocate for policy changes that enhance the protection of refugees, focusing on the need for accountability and adherence to international law.

5.  **Mobilize community support**: Engage local communities in supporting refugees, fostering solidarity and understanding, and encouraging community-led initiatives that address the needs of refugees.