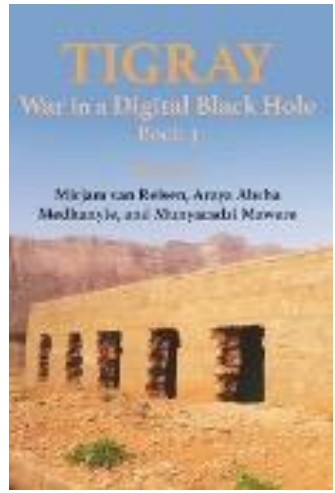
The Impact of the Tigray War on Refugees from Tigray and Eritrea in Sudan: "In the Middle of Life and Death"

Kai Smits & Morgane Wirtz

Chapter in:
Tigray. War in a Digital Black Hole. Book 3.



Cite as: Smits, K. & Wirtz, M. (2024). The Impact of the Tigray War on Refugees from Tigray and Eritrea in Sudan: "In the Middle of Life and Death". In: Van Reisen, M. & Mawere, M. (eds.) *Tigray. War in a Digital Black Hole*, Volume 1. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 173-226. Book URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385402687_Tigray_War_in_a_Digital_Black_Hole_Book_3

The Note on Content and Editorial Decisions can be found here: https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Note-on-Content-and-Editorial-Decisions_Van-Reisen-Medhanyie-Mawere_Tigray_Hysteresis-of-War_Book-3_2024.pdf
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Chapter 5

The Impact of the Tigray War on Refugees from Tigray and Eritrea in Sudan:

"In the Middle of Life and Death"

Kai Smits & Morgane Wirtz

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On top of poverty, the death of a calf is added.

Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees regarding their willingness to return to their home regions after the Tigray war. The narratives of the refugees indicate a strong reluctance to return, influenced by ongoing instability, human rights abuses, and human trafficking. Interviews and field observations reveal that none of the Eritrean refugees who participated in this research considered returning due to concerns about financial extortion and safety due to human trafficking, while many Tigrayan refugees preferred to move to Europe rather than return to Tigray. The interviewees indicated that human trafficking intermediaries were already coming to the refugee camps, and many of the youth were thinking of moving on. The research suggests that the concept of hysteresis, where significant systemic disruptions prevent a return to prior conditions, explains this reluctance. The study highlights the importance of connectivity, as communication blackouts further marginalise refugees and increase their vulnerability. The findings underscore the need for targeted international measures to address human rights abuses and improve conditions to facilitate potential returns. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impacts of critical transitions on refugee return decisions.

Keywords: refugees, human trafficking, instability, hysteresis, human rights abuses

Introduction

Longing to go home is a sentiment that defines the conversation with almost any refugee from Eritrea or Tigray. Perhaps more precisely, the sentiment is about a longing for a time when the conditions will be such that it is possible to return home. Yet, from previous research, we know that very few, if any refugees return home to Eritrea (Malk, 2021), and it is not clear whether Tigrayan refugees would return home (Gardner & Wilmot, 2023). Eritrean refugees trapped in Libya and other countries often express fear of being forcibly returned, even if they never stop dreaming of a day that they could return safely (Müller, 2015; Birger, 2020; Smits & Van Reisen, 2023). There is only scant literature on the factors that contribute to the anticipation by refugees of returning to their country of origin after the adverse conditions that led to the flight are no longer in place. This study compares refugees from Tigray with those from Eritrea in terms of the likelihood of them returning to their homes after the situation resulting from the war in Tigray normalises. The research question is: *Would Eritreans and Tigrayans fleeing after the war in Tigray be willing to return?*

Research context

The war in Tigray has led to the internal displacement of people, as well as Tigrayans fleeing to neighbouring Sudan and other countries. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded almost 60,000 refugees from Tigray living in Eastern Sudan at the time of the fieldwork in June 2021 (UNHCR, 2022; Refugee Consultation Forum, 2021). In addition, many of the 100,000 Eritrean refugees who had been residing in refugee camps in Tigray also fled to Sudan. These refugees joined other Eritrean refugees that continued to flee directly from Eritrea to Sudan. Altogether, UNHCR has currently registered around 137,000 Eritrean refugees at the time of writing (UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Sudan, n.d.), although unrecorded changes may have occurred due to the outbreak of war in Sudan.

The war had a devastating impact on civilians, creating new refugee flows and impacting existing ones. Tigrayans fleeing the war have

been subjected to human rights abuses that may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes from the Ethiopian army, the Eritrean army, and others such as the Fano militia (UN Human Rights Council, 2022; Kahsay, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024b; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Kahsay, 2024b; Tefera, 2024). Eritrean refugees who were already residing in Tigray's four refugee camps were targeted; the camps faced destruction, and many refugees from Eritrea were returned to Eritrea, the country from which they had fled (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Eritreans still in Eritrea faced other effects of the war, such as increased roundups for the army and forced recruitment and deployment in the war in Tigray (Bekit & Chothia, 2022).

The new refugee flows from Tigray have caused challenges for non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and authorities in Eastern Sudan because the flows of these new refugees have come on top of the existing refugee flows of Eritrean refugees fleeing from Eritrea and from other secondary movements from Ethiopia. New locations such as Um Rakuba and Tunaydbah were opened by the UNHCR, going from empty land to improvised camps, to accommodate the sudden flows (UNHCR, 2022).

The Tigrayan refugees are for the most part housed in refugee camps in Eastern Sudan, in the states of Al Qadarif and Blue Nile in Sudan. In response to the rapidly increasing number of refugees, the government of Sudan, in cooperation with humanitarian partners, opened new locations such as locations for arrivals (such as Hamdayete, Village 8, and Wad Al Mahi) and refugee camps for longer stays (main locations Um Racuba, Tunaydbah, Babikri, Dem Saad and Mancheleng) (UNHCR, 2022). Most refugees from both Eritrea and Tigray who were interviewed for this book crossed the border by foot. The refugee camps were specifically erected for the refugees from Tigray. Each of these camps can hold around 20,000 refugees. Officials in Um Racuba said that nothing was there when the camps were erected, although it had been the location of a camp previously during the famine in Ethiopia in 1983–1984. Eritrean refugees mostly go to the established Shegarab refugee camp.

The Tigray war has created new and unstudied situations for both Tigrayan and Eritrean refugees fleeing to Eastern Sudan, which this research will investigate. The data for this chapter was collected before the April 2024 outbreak of the war in Sudan. The outbreak led to new additional flows of refugees and new movements of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), including those from Eritrea and Tigray; however, this is not part of this study.

Theoretical framework

Dynamic change and resilience

The theoretical model employed and tested for this analysis is derived from work on dynamic change and resilience considered in a certain ecosystem (Scheffer *et al.*, 2012, Ganin *et al.*, 2016).

The war in Tigray dramatically disrupted the lives of Tigrayans and Eritreans. Many were forced to flee. What is not known is whether this disruption leads to a permanent change or whether the refugees can move back to their original situation after the conflict is over. The consequence of a severe disruption to the lives of people can be investigated by using the concept of resilience. It is often used in the context of different types of systems, to look at their ability to endure or bounce back. Stocker (2024) describes the concept of resilience across disciplines, with qualities such as the ability of a system to remain unchanged after a disturbance, and the system's ability to bounce back after a disturbance or to transition into another state, which is called an alternative system state or alternative regime (Scheffer *et al.*, 2012). Once a critical shift in the system causes a transition, the system functions fundamentally differently, which is called an alternative system state (Scheffer *et al.*, 2012).

The 'regime' refers to the ecosystem state in the situation. Regime 1 refers to the state before the critical transition and regime 2 refers to the state in the situation following the critical transition. Hysteresis is the distance between the conditions that caused the alternative regime and the conditions that would need to be in place to return to the original situation. To return to the regime before the critical transformation took place through a backward shift, a higher degree of conditions causing the transition need to be met. While this theory

is applied to biological ecosystems, Stocker discusses as to whether this framework can also be applied to biological-social situations or even just the social situation (Stocker, 2024).

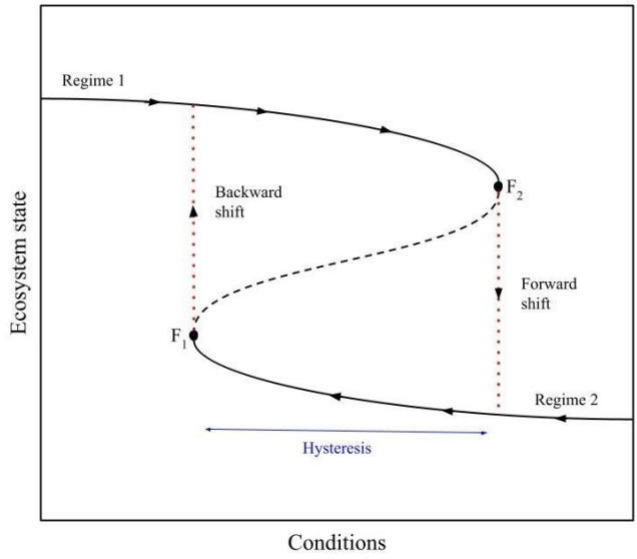

Figure 5.1. A shift between two different regimes causing hysteresis
Source: Adapted from Scheffer *et al.* (2012) by J. Stocker

Applying the concept of hysteresis can be useful in seeing whether a disturbance will be temporary or whether the system will be permanently changed. In the first case, the expectation is that there are indications of recovery, in the sense of the framework set out by Ganin *et al.*, (2016). Ganin *et al.* define system functionality in relation to time, distinguishing the stages of *planning* (for the disturbance), *absorbing* (the disturbance), *recovery,* and finally *adaptation,* where the system adapts to the changes caused by the disturbance. In contrast, if there is a critical transition (Scheffer, 2020), the system will settle in a state that is markedly different from the one it was in before.

This theoretical framework gives an alternative to the 'push and pull theory' on migration. The push and pull theory on migration would invite us to look at the computation of positive and negative conditions in the location or country of origin and the location or

country of residence (Lee, 1966). The decision to move forward or return, according to push and pull, depends on the positive 'pull factors' in places of destination and negative 'push factors' in places of origin. However, earlier research has shown that refugees from Eritrea do not want to return, or consider themselves unable to do so, even if they are facing the most severe circumstances including torture and potential death (Wirtz & Van Reisen, 2023).

Figure 5.2. Push and pull theory of migration
Source: Adapted from Lee (1996) by J. Stocker

The inadequacy of the push and pull framework to predict the anticipated journeys and the reasons for this invites us to reflect on the dynamic of fleeing and returning in a new way (Kidane, 2021). In this research, we explore this dynamic on the anticipation of returning in a comparison between Eritrean and Tigray refugees who fled under similarly severe pressure due to the war in Tigray, to a similar place, in a similar time frame (Refugee Consultation Forum, 2021).

This research looks at the four potential stages of the situation in a transition: the baseline (departure situation), the disturbance, the new situation, and potentially the alternative situation that may emerge, which is defined by a new system from which no return to the baseline will be possible, or only with extreme effort.

The system before the war is defined in this research as the baseline situation, which is regime 1. The situation that caused the fleeing is referred to as regime 2, or the alternative system. The assumption is that once the conditions for the alternative system are removed, the

situation will return to regime 1 and the refugees would anticipate going back as conditions have improved. This would be the hypothesis under push and pull theory which assumes that the anticipated destination is a computation of the advantages and disadvantages of the situation attracting refugees to the intended destination.

The disturbance in the situation of the outbreak of war in Tigray involves Eritrea and causes the flight of refugees from both groups interviewed in Sudan.

Hypothesis 0, based on the 'push and pull theory' is that more attractive conditions plus the desire to return home would provide the situation in which the refugees would consider returning home.

The alternative Hypothesis 1 is that the flight of refugees takes place in a critical transition and that much stronger conditions need to be in place for refugees to consider the situation such that they may anticipate returning. Hypothesis 1a is that the hysteresis may differ between different groups of refugees.

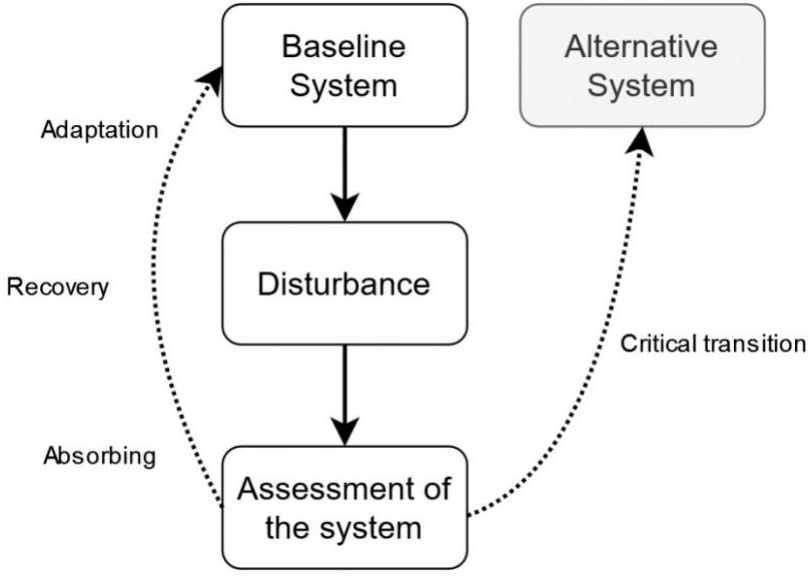

Figure 5.3 Framework to assess whether the disturbance of the Tigray war constitutes a critical transition or not

Source: Based on Scheffer *et al.* (2012) and Ganin *et al.* (2016)

To investigate the hypotheses the following sub-questions are considered:

Sub-RQ1. How do the two groups of refugees (from Eritrea and Tigray) who fled because of the war in Tigray, under different situations in their country of origin, assess (i) the baseline situation in their country, (ii) the disturbance that led them to flee, (iii) the system they fled from, and (iv) the alternative regime, following the disturbance?

Sub-RQ2. What is their perspective on the conditions that should be in place for them to anticipate returning to their country of origin (hysteresis)?

The theoretical framework will be used to look at the situation of refugees from Eritrea and refugees from Tigray, to describe their situation, the impact of the Tigray war, and their current situation. Below, the theoretical concepts are defined and operationalised for this research.

Definitions

The theoretical framework is created from research mostly from the field of ecology; the terms used are therefore defined and operationalised below for this research which concerns the lives and livelihoods of Tigrayan and Eritrean refugees.

A *baseline* is defined as the starting point for a comparison, in this case comparing one baseline situation (the situation in Tigray and Eritrea just before the war in Tigray) with other situations (the situation just after the start of the war, and the situation in the places of transition, the refugee camps).

An *ecosystem* in environmental studies is defined as a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment, but it can also be used in general to describe a complicated network. In this research, we describe a people-centred ecosystem, or *system* in short, which is defined as the community of people interacting with other people and their physical environment; forming a patterned network of relationships, livelihoods, aspirations, interactions, and

realities of people constituting a coherent whole that forms the basis of people's daily lives, as well as social and political structures.

The *disturbance* is defined as one or multiple events or changes that alter the *system* itself or the functioning of the *system*. In this research, the war in Tigray constitutes the disturbance.

Assessment of the system is the analysis of the *system* to look at the current state after the disturbance took place; to see if there are any indications of absorbing, recovery, and adaptation, or whether a critical transition is visible. In this research, the assessment took place in June 2021, around eight months after the start of the war in Tigray.

Absorbing, recovery, and adaptation are the stages through which a *system* can adapt to the impact of a *disturbance* and remain functioning without or with only minor changes. In this research, we defined this as indications of aspirations to return, and whether there is a stable and safe situation to enable waiting for improved situations to allow a return.

Critical transition is when one *system* changes to an *alternative system* following a disturbance. A critical transition in his research would mean that refugees can no longer return (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) to the situation they were in before the war started.

The *alternative system* is a different *system* that forms after a *critical transition* following a *disturbance* if the *system* has not been able to return to its former state or has not been able to adapt and incorporate changes caused by the *disturbance*. The alternative system in this research is defined as one where refugees move away or are moved away from situations in which they are able and willing to (easily) return.

Methodology

The research approach to this chapter is an explorative, ethnographic approach in east Sudan, which took place close to the borders of Tigray and Eritrea. The researchers have taken an interpretative approach that centres on understanding the perspectives of the interviewees. The research design is a comparative case study design, comparing the situations of Eritrean refugees and Tigrayan refugees.

The unit of analysis is at the level of the refugee, meaning that the analysis of the baseline, disturbance, and assessment of the system is done from the perspectives of the interviewed refugees.

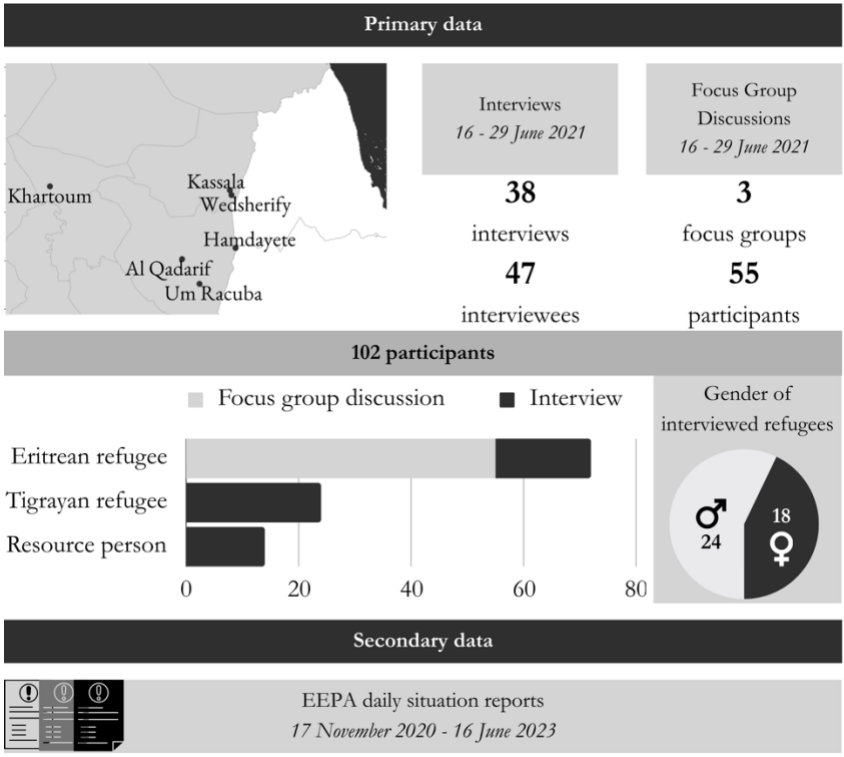

Figure 5.4. Overview of data collected and used in this study

Note: Several interviewees were counted both as refugees and resource persons

Data collection

The data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and semi-structured focus groups. The selection of the participants was purposeful, choosing participants who were refugees originating from either Tigray or Eritrea and who had fled recently. To contrast findings, a smaller subset of participants was selected of refugees from Eritrea or Tigray who had been in Sudan for a longer period to compare experiences. The participant sampling within those groups was largely opportunistic and carried out through snowballing; some interviewees were contacted through the help of a research assistant with contacts in the refugee communities. Some interviews and focus

groups were arranged with the help of NGOs. Another part of the interviewees was invited opportunistically to meeting places in the refugee camps if they were showing interest in talking to us. Often, those refugees could link us to others who were willing to tell us their stories. Within the timeline available, we were often not able to follow up with participants or to build relations of trust which would allow us to speak to people beyond those who were immediately willing to participate. However, by contacting people through trusted individuals within the camps, we were able to create trust and interview people from the refugee communities who may otherwise have refused to do so.

All interviews were done by the researchers together, Morgane Wirtz and Kai Smits. On some occasions, the researchers split to conduct the interviews separately. All interviews were held between 16 and 29 June 2021.

In total, 38 interviews with 47 interviewees and three focus groups with about 55 people total were analysed to write this chapter. All of them were conducted in a face-to-face manner, during fieldwork in Sudan, except one, which was conducted through a WhatsApp call in the Netherlands.

Most of the interviewees from individual interviews (24) had Ethiopian nationality and fled the Tigray regional state - in this chapter, they are referred to as 'Tigrayan refugees'- and others were Eritrean refugees (17). The focus groups were all conducted with Eritrean refugees. Refugee women (18) and men (24) have been interviewed. The Tigrayan refugees came from close to the border, mostly from Humera. The Eritrean refugees were also mostly from areas that were close to the border, including mostly from Omhajer and Teseney.

To complement the interviews with the refugees, participants related to different stakeholder groups operating in the situation were also interviewed. The resource persons included: 9 people working for NGOs or United Nations (UN) Agencies, 3 officials from the Sudanese Government's Commissioner for Refugees, 1 Rashaïda person from Sudan, and 1 local journalist. Those interviews served to

provide context on the situation in East Sudan and the challenges faced in relation to the organisation of the refugee camps. Some people working for NGOs or UN agencies were also refugees, so they were included in the totals for both, but not double-counted in the total number of interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, and Tigrinya. In the latter two cases, the researchers worked together with translators.[1] Sometimes the translators were participants who translated for their friends. In other cases, research assistants collaborating with the researchers translated during the interviews.

The in-depth qualitative interviews collected for this research had an average duration of 1 hour 30 minutes. Before the interview, informed consent was given, either in writing or on record. The participants were informed that they had the right to ask any questions, to choose not to answer, and to end the interview at any time. They were also informed on how their interviews and data would be stored. In most cases, the interview had a semi-structured and linear format. The participants were asked to describe their situation before the war (baseline), then what they had been through at the outbreak of the war (disturbance), to describe and comment on their current situation (new situation) and finally to discuss their perspective for the future (alternative regime).

However, conscious of the situation that most interviewees had recently encountered traumatic situations and following the do-no-harm principle, it happened on occasion that the linear format of the interviews was not followed and that the researchers let the participant choose their way of telling their story. All interviews ended with the question: "Is there something you want to add?" to leave space for new topics to emerge that might not have been identified by the authors.

[1] Translators translated from Arabic to English, and Tigrinya to English. In a few cases collaboration was needed, composed of one translator from Tigrinya to Arabic and a second translator from Arabic to English. This last case was avoided, but put in place when interviewees really expressed their desire to testify and no direct translator from Tigrinya to English was available.

The interviews were held in informal settings, mostly in private places like rented apartments or the houses/tents of the interviewees.[2]

In parallel to the data collection in the form of interviews, a new data set was created composed of Situation Reports published by the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA). The EEPA Situation Reports started on the 17 November 2020 to fill the lack of information on the situation in Tigray after the war broke out. During the period of the war, the EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa were published on an almost daily, regular basis with some interruptions. These reports were published on the EEPA website and social media and shared with a list serve. The Situation Reports had a strong focus on the war in Tigray. The reports were published as two-pagers. For analytical purposes the content was transferred in a spreadsheet, allowing for coding-labelling of the content. This data was re-used for this research with EEPA's permission. The dataset contained every line published in the Situation Reports from 17 November 2020 to 16 June 2023.

Data analysis

After the field research, the interviews were transcribed by the researchers. As the researchers interviewed both Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees, the data were analysed separately for both groups, considering that the baseline systems and the subsequent disturbance and assessment would potentially differ. A line-by-line open coding was done in which the topics that came up in the interviews were labelled. When a new topic came up, previous interviews were also re-checked for this topic. The researchers then analysed the main topics and grouped them into categories to fit the theoretical framework of resilience. They included information about the

[2] The security of the interviewees is a top priority for the authors of this chapter. However, it could not be avoided that for some interviews in the Um Racuba refugee camp an official from the Commissioner for Refugees (COR) in Sudan was present. In this case, the researchers, working in close collaboration with the translator, took time to explain to the interviewees who the COR official was. His presence may have affected the answers from interviewees, as he was not trusted by the interviewees. How his presence might have affected the answers was discussed at length with the translator (Interviews were held in Tigrinya, a language that the COR official did not speak).

baseline situation (including topics such as what was life like before the war, what the situation and the interviewee's personal life were like), the disturbance (what happened after the start of the war, killings of civilians, sexual violence, and fleeing to Sudan) and the assessment of the system currently (what is the situation like in the refugee camps, how many people are going to Libya, what is the security situation) and the alternative regime (what are the perspectives for the future, does the interviewee have plans, if yes, what are they).

The data from the EEPA Situation Reports dataset was coded and labelled by research assistants according to different categories: Sexual violence, deliberate famine, destruction of the health system, key massacres, destruction of cultural heritage, refugee camps, and forced return, and perpetration of crimes by Eritrean soldiers. The objective of using this dataset was to contextualise and triangulate the data from the interviews. It was analysed comparatively with the interviews, to verify information and timelines of events.

Table 5.1. Overview of data collected

	Data type	**Source**	**Gathering tool**	**Analysis**
Primary data	Semi-structured interviews with Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees	Interviews with Eritrean refugees conducted by Morgane Wirtz and Kai Smits	Topic list: baseline, disturbance, new situation, alternative regime	Coding/ labelling
	Semi-structured interviews with resource persons	Interviews with resource refugees conducted by Morgane Wirtz and Kai Smits	Topic list: opinion and general information on the baseline, disturbance, new situation,	Supplementary information and comparative analysis with the interviews

	Data type	Source	Gathering tool	Analysis
			and alternative regime	
Reused material	Situation reports published by EEPA	EEPA	Mixed method (opportunistic, snowballing review and systematic)	Coding/ labelling; comparative analysis with the interviews

Source: Developed by the authors for this chapter

The quotes selected during the writing process are the most representative of the situation of refugees at the border between Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia as found in the coding analysis.

Conscious of the precarious situation of the participants and considering concerns regarding their safety, the researchers gave high priority to ensuring that the privacy of the participants was protected and full adherence to privacy protection regulations. Data and metadata have been stored on password-protected secure drives. Participants were de-identified using identity codes. Multiple codes were allocated if necessary to ensure that the de-identification was carried out correctly.

Locations

The interviews were held in Khartoum (3), Kassala (11), Wedsherify (8), Hamdayete (13), Um Racuba (10), and Al Qadarif (2) in Sudan. Two focus groups were conducted in Hamdayete and one in Khartoum. We chose the locations to find a diverse range of refugees with which to speak, including refugees arriving in reception centres, those staying in refugee camps, and those outside refugee camps. For

time reasons, it was not possible to visit the Shegarab refugee camp, where Eritrean refugees are hosted.

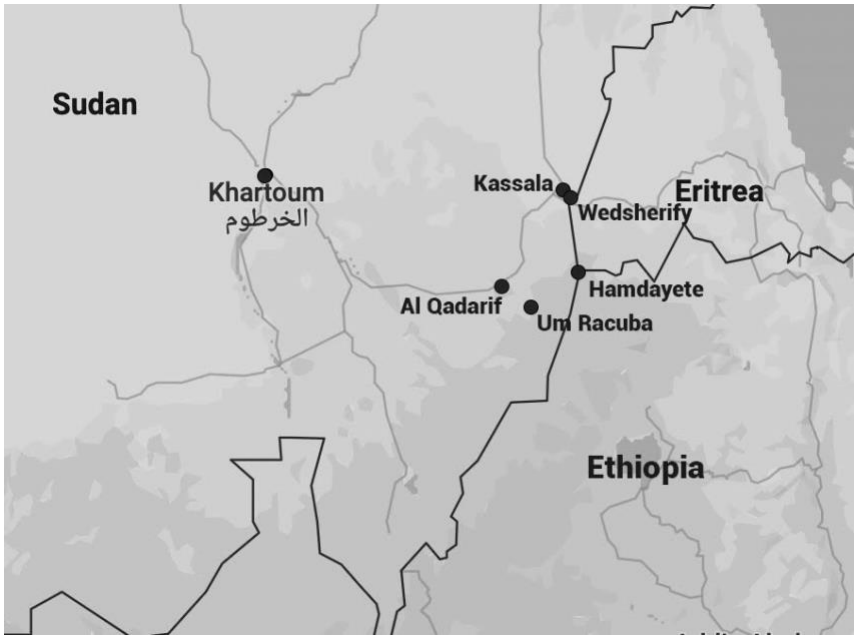

Figure 5.5. Locations of interviews

Source: Developed by the authors for this chapter using FreeVectorMaps.com

From Khartoum, we travelled first to Kassala, where we mainly interviewed Eritrean refugees who were living outside refugee camps. We then travelled to the nearby reception centre of Wedsherify, where we mainly interviewed recently arrived Eritrean refugees. We travelled along the border with Eritrea to Hamdayete, a reception centre close to the borders with Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The rainy season had started, which made it difficult to travel to Hamdayete. In the border reception centre of Hamdayete, north Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees arrive, but they are kept separate from each other, and Eritreans are transported to other reception points and camps. They are generally moved to Wedsherifay reception centre, and to the Shegarab refugee camp. When we were there most refugees were Tigrayan. While Hamdayete is not supposed to house

people permanently at the time when the interviews were taken a sizable community of refugees was staying there long-term.

Figure 5.6. Um Racuba refugee camp in June 2021
Copyright Morgane Wirtz/Hans Lucas

From Hamdayete, we travelled to Um Racuba, which houses Tigrayan refugees. The camp was hastily constructed, with many buildings being little more than tents that are not always fit for Sudan's weather, which includes both heavy rains and strong winds. Tents were slowly being replaced with tukuls, UNHCR officials said, but it was only possible to build those in the dry season. The refugee camps are mostly surrounded by a vast open area and are easily accessible.

The camps also hold staff of NGOs who live there and perform various functions. However, at the time of the field visit in June 2021, the staff in Um Racuba were leaving the camp in the evening and lived in quarters outside of the camps.

The researchers then travelled to Al Qadarif, where more Tigrayan refugees were interviewed. From Al Qadarif, we travelled back to Khartoum where a final focus group with Eritrean refugees was held.

Results and findings

This section describes the background of the different groups of interviewees. The results will be presented for the two case study groups, with the results for the Tigrayan refugees discussed first, and the Eritrean refugees in the subsequent section. This order was chosen to look at the new refugee situation of the Tigrayan refugees first, as all the interviewees were directly impacted by the Tigray war, and then assess the situation for the more established stream of refugees, the Eritreans, and compare how the war impacted, including those indirectly impacted. For both groups, we analysed the aspects described in the theoretical framework, namely the 'baseline', 'disturbance', and 'assessment of the system' with the aim to look at whether there are signs of recovery towards the baseline system, or a critical transition towards an alternative system.

The baseline was operationalised in this research as the situation before the war in Tigray broke out. Refugees described their lives, the (human rights) situation in their countries, and their livelihoods. In the part about the disturbance, we look at the war itself: What happened after the war broke out; how the lives and situations of the refugees had changed; what they experienced and saw. Finally, we describe the assessment of the system at the time of the interviews: What the situation is like for the refugees in the reception centres, camps, and urban settings; are there indications that there is a process of recovery that may lead to a return to the baseline system; what are the perceived challenges, preventing the refugees from returning to their old lives. After the description of the results for both groups, the results will be compared.

Background to the interviewees

The refugees that were interviewed for the research came from various backgrounds. Most of the Tigrayan refugees who were interviewed had recently arrived, whereas in the Eritrean community, more people were interviewed who had been there for a longer time

and could tell us how the situation had changed. Six groups of refugees can be distinguished among those interviewed:

1. New refugees from Tigray that fled after the start of the war (Tigrayan refugees) (23)
2. Existing refugees or migrants from Tigray who were in Sudan before the start of the war (Tigrayan refugee) (1)
3. New refugees from Eritrea that fled after the start of the war (Eritrean refugees) (9, plus two focus groups)
4. Refugees from Eritrea that were in Tigray at the start of the war, and had fled following the war's outbreak (Eritrean refugee) (1)
5. Refugees from Eritrea who were in Sudan before the start of the war (Eritrean refugees) (7, plus one focus group)
6. Refugees from other places disturbed by the war (for example the Amhara region in Ethiopia) (Ethiopian refugee) (1)

There was only one Tigrayan refugee we interviewed who was already in Sudan before the start of the war; but given the differences between the Eritrean refugee numbers (who had consistently fled over the decades before) and the Tigrayan refugees (who fled in large numbers only after the start of the Tigray war), this was not unexpected. The refugees from all groups provided key insights into the results and findings below.

Tigrayan refugees

In this part, the results will be presented of the situation in Tigray before the war (baseline), what happened after the war in Tigray started (disturbance) and the current situation faced by Tigrayan refugees after having fled Tigray, including any indications that the refugees may be able to recover to the situation before the war, or the creation of a situation in which the refugees cannot return to that situation (assessment of the system).

In times of peace

This section describes the situation before the events that created the 'disturbance' that prompted them to flee. This is called the 'baseline'.

Most Tigrayan refugees interviewed had held jobs or were in school before the start of the war, such as a job as an architect, a doctor, a waiter in a restaurant, a hairdresser, and a cement worker.

> *Before this conflict began, our life situation was in a good place, a good time. Our children were going to school, we were eating good food. It was a good situation. Our homes, our beds were clean. We wore good clothes. Even our government had a good policy. It was good justice for us.* (Interviewee 5023-2, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Although for most interviewees, life was good, some people struggled amidst a lack of opportunities. One interviewee (5014) left to try and find work in Saudi Arabia but was intercepted by human traffickers and tortured for ransom in Yemen.

> *After the 12th grade in high school, I failed. After I failed, I gave up and I tried to go to Saudi Arabia through Yemen. I stayed there for long days. And after that, when I came back from Yemen, the war started.* (Interviewee 5014, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The overall baseline situation for the interviewees from Tigray was that they lived in a situation of relative calm and reasonable prosperity. When the war broke out, their situation rapidly and unexpectedly changed.

Facing killing and rape

What can be identified as a 'disturbance' in the model, was a dreadful situation that the participants faced. They faced killings and rape, because of which they decided to flee.

Most of the interviewees came from Humera, an area close to Eritrea. Many interviewees described the outbreak of the war as sudden and unexpected. It started with the use of heavy weapons, followed by an influx of soldiers from the Ethiopian army, Amhara regional forces, and Fano militia.

> *November 7th. In the middle of the day, in light time, we didn't see the military, we didn't see… But we saw heavy weapons dropped in our city, by the Eritreans. They left it in the middle of the streets, in front of the buildings, like every, every, everywhere.* (Interviewee 5028, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Once the Ethiopian army and the Amhara forces and militia entered, they started killing people. They targeted civilians, even children.

> *When I escaped, running to the church, I saw a lot of dead bodies and I also saw when they killed them. They killed them using knives in their hearts and throats. Even the [Amhara] militia and the military, when they see a child, they say: "This child is young now, but in the future, he will kill us, so kill him now". […] [A friend of mine was killed]. They are 18 years old. I saw that*. (Interviewee 5027-2, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Tigrayans and Amhara people who had been neighbours were suddenly enemies. The soldiers started targeting civilians who were suspected of cooperating with the Tigray People's Liberation Front, Tigray's main party – but civilians who had nothing to do with the party were targeted too.

> *The Amhara people showed them the Tigrayans home. Who was with the TPLF, who was working with the Tigrayans, who were participating in the meeting.* (Interviewee 5025, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

> *And in this conflict [four months ago], they burnt our house. I lost my house. And this child, his father is from the Tigray region. I am from Amhara but my husband is from Tigray. [...] They targeted us because I am Amhara and my husband is from Tigray. There are many enemies against us.* (Interviewee 5006, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Many interviewees indicated that they fled when the soldiers started targeting civilians, but some people stayed in their houses. The houses were frequently looted. In Humera the perpetrators were alleged as being mainly the Amhara forces and Amhara militia. In addition, women experienced rape when the military entered their houses.

> *I was sleeping inside the house. My family were outside, drinking coffee. They knocked on the door and they said: "We want to search for weapons". My father said: "There is my daughter sleeping, so, shall we wake her up?". They said: "No, no, don't worry. It is okay". And then, they do what they did and told me not to scream, not to say anything. So I had to stay quiet.* (Interviewee 5014, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Another participant also described a horrific situation in which she was raped and held captive for three days, perpetrated by the military,

allegedly supported by neighbours, clearly creating great anxiety about the safety of the home:

> *Then after a while, we heard soldiers are staying at our house, so we wanted to go back to our house. Then they took our children out and they raped us. […] There were five soldiers. One of them beat me, and I fell down to the floor. Then the five of them raped me continuously for 3 days with no food or water. It was like … cruel and difficult, and it was harsh. There were neighbours, Amhara or Wolkait, with the help of them, they raped me.* (Interviewee 5015, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Rape also occurred on the streets, and on the road, women were taken to secluded places where they were raped. Some were subjected to sexual slavery for the soldiers. Women describe being raped in front of others.

> *Then they start raping, step by step, turn by turn … there were four of them, we were two women. […] One woman, two soldiers raped her. The other soldiers were watching, guarding. And after they finished the two, the two will go and rape the other, and the others will watch. [This happens in front of the men who were being beaten].* (Interviewee 5016, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The women who experienced rape experienced other violence and extreme cruelty during the perpetration of the rape.

> *They beat me, and they slapped me in my face. They smashed me. They said: did you change your mind about changing your nationality? If not, we're not going to leave you alive. In three days, they don't give me food or water. […] No toilet, no food, they beat me in my neck and my whole body. No talking, no food, no water, no latrine. Just they rape me and beat me.* (Interviewee 5015, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The women also indicated that language of ethnic cleansing was used during the rape, to either force the victims to change their nationality or to erase them – and any potential babies they may have. Both the Amhara militia and the Eritrean soldiers were allegedly implicated in sexual violence (Interviewees 5013-2, 5014, 5015, 5016, 5023-1, 5028) in some cases with elements of ethnic cleansing (Interviewees 5015,

5016, 5023-1, 5028). For example, one person told the story of a woman:

> *After they [raped] her, they burn steel and they will burn it in her abdomen [from the outside], because it will give birth to a Tigrayan man. When she asked: "Why are you doing that to me, because I didn't do anything to you?" They said: "Yes, we know that. But you will give birth to a Tigrayan man who can fight with us, who can stand with you also".* (Interviewee 5023-1, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

There was no opportunity to bury the dead. Multiple people indicated that they saw dead bodies lying on the street, but they were not able to perform burials.

> *There is no permission to do the funeral. You will do it at night. Otherwise, they will kill you. Even, if they see you, they will kill you.* (Interviewee 5006, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

While people fled, the roads to escape were very dangerous. A Tigrayan doctor in a reception centre in Sudan treated victims of rape. He described how the violence, including sexual violence, continued on the roads and that most rapes were gang rapes.

> *Most of the women that have come here [who have been raped], most of have been gang raped. A group of soldiers, a group of militias. And some of them are raped at different checkpoints. Raped here, and then at another checkpoint, another rape incident.* (Interviewee 5013-1, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The doctor also said the soldiers were trying to assert ownership over the women by giving them a note stating she had already been raped, but that this did not prevent further rapes in most cases.

> *Once a soldier has raped her, they give them a note. So this note would free them, from any other rape or attack. If they get a note from a soldier, then no one would touch them, they say – but only after being raped. Two women said they were raped at two checkpoints, even with the paper. [...] They said that the paper was saying, "She is mine, so don't touch her". That's what the women said. So this is how they treat the women.* (Interviewee 5013-1, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The stories of violence and rape we heard are too many to write down. They were defined by a high level of cruelty and targeted innocent civilians. Some interviewees expressed surprise that the violence had turned against them, instead of the Tigrayan soldiers. This extreme level of ethnically targeted violence is what defined the stories from the Tigrayan refugees about the disturbances. All Tigray interviewees, except for one who had been in Sudan before the war, fled due to the outbreak of violence.

In makeshift camps, becoming part of human trafficking networks

The refugees found themselves in a new system. We investigated how the Tigrayan refugees are currently adapting to the situation, and whether there are any indications that absorption, recovery, and adaptation are taking place, or whether a critical transition has occurred.

The key issues that came up were the difficult situation in the makeshift camps, which were quickly erected, and the looming threat of the established human trafficking networks finding their ways into the new camps.

Unsafe camps and lack of resources

Each of the families and individuals living in the camps have stories to tell of the war. The refugees interviewed in Hamdayete, a small town close to the border with Ethiopia functioning as a reception centre, were expected to leave to go to refugee camps, but over 5000 people still lingered there:

> *You know what the main reason is? Because as I told you before, my family is still in Humera, near here. So I don't need to go out of here, because I still need to hear information. I need … if any chance, I want to go and visit them, or to come back. So I need to be nearby, not far. That's why most people are staying here.* (Interviewee 5013-2, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The other camp, Um Racuba camp, located about an hour's drive from the town of Al Qadarif, is somewhat isolated at the end of a road under construction, was established on 20 November 2020. In June 2021, it housed 22,000 refugees from Tigray. For kilometres, tents and straw houses were visible. "Twenty aid organisations work

here. There is a food distribution every day for the refugees. Regarding education, we have three primary schools in the camps", explained a protection officer for the Sudanese Government's Commissioner for Refugees. However, some young refugees were not able to go, because the schools are far away from their tents.

> *The main challenge now is the season of rain. We are working on the streets and to protect the tents. […] They are flying away. And there are no clothes [available for the refugees] for the rainy season.* (Interviewee 8003, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021*)*

A lot of work was done in six months in the camps, but the situation remained difficult. Refugees complained about the lack of medicine and hunger. An elderly man explained:

> *In this camp, before, two months ago, it was good, it was nice because they gave us the food monthly, they gave us food distribution, aid, everything was good. […] Now we are in a bad situation because of the wind and the rain. Even the World Food Program (WFP) stopped the distribution of food. In those two weeks we are in danger times, we are in a bad situation. When the wind comes, our shelter will fall down and when we want to repair it, we must sell our food, our material. This is a big problem at the moment. Also, at the hospital, there is no medicine here. Because of this shortage of medicine, a lot of people are dying here in the camps.* (Interviewee 5023, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

Between May and June 2021, there was no food distribution in Um Racuba, several refugees said. The WFP wanted to replace the food donations with cash donations. The refugees refused, challenging the amount of 3,000 Sudanese pounds (6 euros) that the UN had offered them per person per month. In the meantime, the situation was blocked.

The refugees, having fled their homes in a hurry, left family members and material possessions in Tigray. In Sudan, they found themselves in a precarious economic situation. The ones that have a job are an exception. "Some refugees are working as volunteers, some as farmers, some have a business in the camp", the Commissioner for Refugees protection officer explained (Interviewee 8003, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021).

Most people do not have a job, and if they do have one, it is not enough to survive. However, they cannot go out of the camp without permission, and those who go out without permission are not able to obtain a work permit.

> *This job is not enough to survive. But it is better than having no job. Something is better than nothing. That is why I am working here. When I see people who don't have a job, I feel ashamed. I feel like that is not…. Because they don't have a job and they don't have…. It is difficult to survive for them. But for me it is good. Because I see less than me.* (Interviewee 5025, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

Another interviewee lamented that he could not continue his studies and that there was little to do:

> *I am a civil engineering student. But here I can't continue my studies. There is no university in the camps, and even if I go to Khartoum, the courses are in Arabic. I won't be able to understand. While waiting for a solution, I spend my time watching movies and series.* (Interviewee 5025, unofficial conversation with Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

The lack of things to do is weighing on the refugees. Sitting unoccupied with an empty stomach is a painful experience for everyone, especially after the traumatic experiences and losses that the Tigrayan refugees suffered. Leaving the camp to go to a city is not allowed without special permission.

> *5030: My health was not good in Um Racuba. [...]. I saw a doctor, doctor [redacted]. When he saw me, he said that he didn't have what was needed to cure me and that I had to go to Al Qadarif. So he gave me permission to go to Al Gadarif. [...] Sometimes when they ask me, the police maybe, I answer that still I have the permission and that I get the medicals from the hospital.*
>
> *Smits: Is the permission only valid as long as you are being treated in the hospital?*
>
> *5030: Yes. It is just for a very short time, like one month. You have to renew it all the time with the immigration police.* (Interviewee 5030, interview by Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

This interview with a refugee working in a small cafe in Al Qadarif City illustrates that permits are given out only for valid reasons and that as soon as those reasons no longer apply, the refugee is expected

to travel back to the camp. It continuously needs to be renewed. According to refugees in Al Qadarif, the police have become more active in checking the validity of working permits in the city. Even Tigrayan refugees who had been there for a long time did not receive any permanent status, so they had also been facing additional scrutiny.

There is currently no prospect for the Tigrayan refugees to be able to work or to create a sustainable future for themselves in the camp. The housing and facilities are recently built and are not fit to face the extreme weather conditions. In addition, the camp is isolated and to travel outside, you need special permission.

Targets for the human trafficking networks

The aspirations of the Tigrayan refugees fell into one of two categories: go back to Tigray – either when peace returned, or to fight – or move onwards.

> *I already joined the army. I trained, I already trained. […] Yes, under three men, two men… I trained. I don't want to talk about that.* (Interviewee 5016, Interview by Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Some participants expressed clearly that they would consider returning to fight if they had weapons:

> *Everyone wants that. This is everyone's need. If they got …. Everyone, even that woman, even if you ask the children also. If we got the weapons, if we got this chance to go and fight with them, we will go. Even me, including me. If we got a chance to go inside and to fight with my friends, with my family, with my people, I am ready. If possible, stop the war. Otherwise, they are trying to destroy the whole Tigray, the whole Tigray. If Tigray is destroyed, we don't have any value here. They will take our properties, our lands, our leaders, our families, our people, everything they will destroy. So what are we doing here?* (Interviewee 5024, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

Some interviewees, like the ones above, speak about their desires and aspirations to fight in the war in Tigray. However, going back to Tigray was even more dangerous than leaving. Just to cross the

border, Tigrayans risked their lives. In Hamdayete, a volunteer explained:

> *Some try to cross the river [that separates Sudan to Tigray], and the river took them … to go back, to go visit their family. Because of the shortage of food and everything. […] You have so many people killed when they try to cross like that. So many young people, are taken by the river.* (Interviewee 5016, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

Others expressed the aspiration to take the road to Libya and Europe. In June 2021, this was already becoming apparent. Hamdayete's volunteer, herself a Tigrayan refugee, explained:

> *Yes, one of my brother's friends, he went, and he's still in Libya, I think. He says he is OK. I have some friends who are leaving to Libya. Of course, they are not OK in Libya. […] Yeah, most of them. Most of the young people are escaping.* (Interviewee 5016, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

One Tigrayan refugee volunteer had the opportunity to translate and speak to many young Tigrayans who were planning to leave.

> *I worked there in Hamdayete, in Um Racuba and also in Al Tunaydbah. I went to the camps so I had the chance to talk with many young people. So at that, I understand that most people are planning to leave Sudan, or to use Sudan as a transition to somewhere.* (Interviewee 5022, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

In many cases, it is out of desperation that refugees set out on this road. One of them explains:

> *I spend my whole time smoking and somehow drinking alcohol. The situation is so bored and hopeless. […] I start talking with my uncle […] about going to Libya or Egypt… In my view moving over there, there are two chances: die or alive … but here I am just in the middle of alive and die.* (Interviewee 5024, interview by Wirtz, WhatsApp messages, April 2022)

There are several factors that put Tigrayan refugees living in Sudan on the road to Libya. Among the reasons are (i) the economic situation in the camps, (ii) the feeling of insecurity that refugees still feel and (iii) the desire to help their family. The decision to leave can be a group decision, taken among friends: "From here, they go out

by group. Like he will talk to his friend, his friend will say that he agrees with him, they will go", a woman in Um Racuba explains (Interviewee 5027, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021).

In other cases, refugees are pushed onto the routes by intermediaries who work for smugglers and traffickers. Their role is to make some kind of "advertisement" for the journey to Libya. Two women describe:

> *From here. They come in, of course, because it's open, anyone can come in and out. I don't have much information but I think they came and they say: "It's easy to get through this in Sudan, and it's cheaper, so you can go easily", they told the young people, and they believed them.* (Interviewee 5016, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

We were walking with a Tigrayan refugee in Um Racuba refugee camp when his phone rang. After he finished his conversation, he turned to us, being very upset:

> *It was my best friend. And he has gone to Libya. He is gone. He was gone yesterday. It is my best friend. We have gone to primary school together, high school together, secondary school together. And he is gone yesterday. He is gone yesterday.* (Interviewee 5024, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

This young refugee, who lost his family in the rush to escape from Tigray, is now alone. Another relative we interviewed in Um Racuba was facing calls for ransom for their cousin, who recently left for Libya. Like the others, he did not say goodbye:

> *He didn't say goodbye. Even, he left his phone. When he left his phone in the house, after one week, we understood that he is gone. After two weeks, he called and said: "I am in Libya". If he is safe or not at that time, we don't know. But he said to us that he is in Libya.* (Interviewee 5028, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

A few days after this call, human traffickers started calling her. They demanded the sum of 300,000 Ethiopian birr (EUR 5,775.45[3]) and

[3] Currency calculated using Oanda.com at the time the payment demand is estimated to have taken place.

threatened to kill the young Tigrayan if the money was not sent. The relative and his family regularly received calls from the traffickers or voice messages with the cries of their cousin. The family was under pressure to pay:

> *We don't have that much money at this moment. Because we left our properties, our home, we don't have a job, everything. Even we are trying to gather money here from our people here, like helping us. And they help us, the people are helping us but the Sudanese money is much less. So we couldn't help him till now. Maybe he can die. God knows about him. But we are so stressed about him. And he sends vocals of his voice. I can't handle this. This is more than my capacity. I cannot control this, I cannot suffer these challenges at this moment.* (Interviewee 5028, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

Young Tigrayans are not just planning to go to Libya, but they already started to travel to Libya. Family members already started to receive calls for ransom in June 2021.

Although the refugee camp of Um Racuba is new, traffickers have already started to target it and the new refugee population. Although the Sudanese authorities that were interviewed, denied that there were any smugglers or traffickers inside the camp, the refugees in the camp said there are people inside to advertise the journeys and to arrange transport to Khartoum, from where the routes to Libya continue. About such people, who are agents of the trafficking networks, one interviewee said:

> *It is not simple and easy to know them because they work with the network and those networks are high up connected with the local community. They do this secretly. […] Some of them are Tigrayans and some of them are Sudanese. They work together as a network. [...] Most of them are young from 28 to 38 – 39.* (Interviewee 5022, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

Such intermediaries are described as Sudanese, and Tigrayan, and another interviewee also identifies that some are Eritrean. Furthermore, rumours about kidnapping have started to circulate:

> *We hear also sometimes Rashaïda. They come here. And also sometimes, the old people tell us: "Keep your children, maybe they are going to kidnap your child". We*

hear that there are kidnappings. (Interviewee 5028, interview by Wirtz, face-to-face, Um Racuba, June 2021)

The high drive of many young Tigrayans to leave for Europe is particularly clear from the interviews. Not all young Tigrayans interviewed, want to leave. Some are waiting to go back when the situation allows, and others are planning to go back to fight. However, what is clear is that the new camps have immediately become targets of human trafficking networks.

Eritrean refugees

In this part, the results will be presented of the situation in Eritrea before the war in Tigray (baseline), what happened after the war in Tigray started (disturbance), and the current situation faced by Eritrean refugees after having fled Eritrea or Tigray, including any indications that the refugees may be able to recover from the situation before the war or the creation of a situation in which the refugees cannot return to that situation (assessment of the system).

Repression and indefinite national service

The baseline situation for Eritrean refugees is quite different than the situation of Tigrayan refugees. This section below presents the findings of how the Eritrean refugees perceived their situation before the 'disturbance' that prompted them to flee.

All the Eritrean interviewees spoke about their experiences in the indefinite national service when discussing their lives in Eritrea before the war. Military training and national service are obligatory for all Eritreans, men and women. The national service has a civil service and a military component and the military component is particularly feared: "I sold coffee. From the coffee, I went directly to the army". (Interviewee 5002, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021). All the interviewees expressed that they were unwilling to be in the indefinite national service. The longest period that one interviewee in this study served in the national service before fleeing was 23 years.

Many of the participants had attempted to escape and avoid the indefinite national service.

> *I joined the national service before. And when they gave me holidays, I stayed with my family. I spent two years in the national service. When you spend two years, they give you a holiday for one month. And then, I didn't go back.* (Interviewee 5011, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

It is seen as normal to be on the run from the indefinite national service. One interviewee named it as almost an afterthought:

> *Nothing happens [in Omhajer]. Everything is normal. But we are under threat of national service.* (Interviewee 5017, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Three interviewees mentioned that they or their direct family tried to avoid military service by working in gold mines (Interviewees 5001, 5003-1, 5003-3). Militia are involved in some cases in the roundups of people for the military service. One interviewee mentioned a brigade called 65, working for the Eritrean government:

> *At first, some groups arrested me. It is militia. It is called 65. It is something official for the government. They are the government. It is kind of army. They catch people and they send them to training and then they put you on the border with Ethiopia or Sudan.* (Interviewee 5001, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Five participants spoke particularly about national military service training (5001, 5002, 5004, 5005, 5017). There is excessive punishment in national military service training:

> *Very high punishment. I saw one tried to escape and they did very high punishment, beating him, his head and everywhere. [And for small mistakes?] For example, for the small mistakes; if the soldier says "don't go to this place" or "don't take water", and you know people all the time, they want water, the soldiers will punish you by beatings, with iron.* (Interviewee 5001, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Sexual violence occurs in both the national military service and in the military training, one interviewee stated who had experienced it directly.

> *There is harassment. There is sexual violence. Yes, there is many. […] They do all the kinds of harassment. They do anything. Even the sex. […] They choose some girls. I don't know how they choose. They take whom they want. […] They have their house near us. For example, they send me to the group and tell, for example "Come, [Redacted] come, the leader wants you".* (Interviewee 5002, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Participants from Eritrea referred to imprisonment as a common situation. Prison names that were mentioned in the interviews were Wad Habit (north Teseney), 'John Cena' (north of Eritrea), unnamed prisons in Aligidir and Barentu, Oum Arba (Teseney), Ashrai (around Keren), Nakfa, Taroumba (in the south), Alla (near Dekemhare), Daguna (in Barentu), and Ashferet (near Keren).[4] Many interviewees had been to multiple prisons in different locations at different times. All interviewees had been sent to prison either for deserting or fleeing from the indefinite national service or attempting to escape Eritrea, except for one interviewee who was accused of participating in a coup attempt in 2013 (Interviewee 5009). The interviewees told similar stories about prison, including mentioning overcrowding, extreme heat or cold, lack of food, lack of hygiene, presence of pests, diseases, complete darkness, and severe punishment for things as small as asking for water.

> *It is very, very hard experience, to be honest with you. For example, in one room like this [about 30 square meters], it is normal to put even 400 people. It is very crowded. You haven't got any space to sleep well. They will not allow you to go to the toilet or do anything. And even you will not see the sun. [...] It is very difficult also for me or for all the people to deal with each other. Especially about the older prisoners. They have something like trauma, they are not okay like the others. […] Some people killed people. I found someone who spent 15 years over there. There are many people who died there. Even me, I was suffering from TB [Tuberculosis], because there is no good food. I remembered three people who died on my time, I saw them.*

[4] The researchers wrote down the names of the prisons as they understood them from the interview. The phonetic writing may differ.

(Interviewee 5004, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Corresponding to the baseline situation in Eritrea, interviewees discussed the lack of food and other essential resources. As a result of the indefinite national service, people identified part of the problems they were facing was that they were not allowed to freely work, and they were not allowed to travel:

> *[I left] because of the bad situation in Eritrea, no good food, no … I was suffering too much in Eritrea. […] Before it was better than now. Because before I found work, here, here. There is some money.*[5] *But now there is no job. I came before from the Highland. At that time I found work. But now even we have difficulties to find things like food.* (Interviewee 5007, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

COVID-19 restrictions in Eritrea from 2020 onwards had made the situation worse, according to two interviewees, while one interviewee said that the situation was bad before and after, and that it hardly made a difference:

> *Corona brought more pressure on me and my family because at that time many things stopped; access to sugar, some food… Because no travelling was possible. Many things stop.* (Interviewee 5001, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

All the Eritrean interviewees named one or more of the reasons above as the reason for fleeing to Sudan. One person fled to Ethiopia first before coming to Sudan. The baseline situation for Eritreans is defined by severe restrictions, no regular jobs, limited access to food and resources, and fear of repression. This repression was described in the context of the national service, particularly military service, and imprisonment.

Rounded up and deployed

The concept of 'disturbance' relates to the moment in time when a situation changes. In this section, the abstract idea of a 'disturbance'

[5] Generally, all people in Eritrea work in the national service; however, this interviewee was elderly and, therefore, may have been released from active national service and was trying to make ends meet by doing small, irregular jobs.

in a 'system' of an Eritrean refugee, is the moment that provoked the Eritrean refugee to flee. The following findings speak to the 'disturbance' that provoked the refugee to such an extent that they decided to flee.

Eritreans who were in the army at the time of the outbreak of the war reported that they were called up for training when the war started. They were not told that they would be deployed for the war.

> *Four months ago, in February 2021, they wanted to send us to the area of Ombajer. They want to send us to training. They told us, you would be sent to that area just for two weeks, just for training, but we do not trust that because we know it is not the area of the training. The area of the training is like the west or another area. I know that they will send me to Tigray area for fighting, and I know it is a very dangerous area. Some people have died, some are arrested… I'm thinking, if I die at that place, the government will not continue to see how my family will live and they will not give them anything. They will not care for my family. So I decided to leave Eritrea and I told my family about that.* (Interviewee 5005, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Army recruits were not the only ones finding themselves forced into a war. In one testimony, a prisoner was taken directly from prison to the battlefield, arriving there before the war had started. He stated that around 160 of the 640 prisoners, those that had spent longer than 8 years in prison, were sent to Tigray. He was the only interviewee that served in Tigray as a soldier in the war and who was not able to escape before being deployed.

> *They released us on 30 October from prison and at 2 November I was in Sheraro. It took like two days from the prison to Sheraro. […] No one gives you information. Just you will find yourself on the car, going to place. You don't know where you will go. At that moment, I was just thinking about how we can fight again against the regime. Maybe I discussed with many of my colleagues in the prison: If we are out of the prison, we will fight against the regime. But the Eritrean army didn't give us any chance to do anything. We found ourselves at the border. And also they divided us. They divided the prisoners in different armies. [...] We didn't understand anything until we reached the area of Badme, the conflict area between Ethiopia and Eritrea. At that area, we just know what will happen.* (Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The former prisoner fought in Sheraro, where he said the biggest battle was over in just one week. "We have all the army equipment, all the army cars, and even the heavy equipment for bombing - 120 and 130…" (Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021). According to the interviewee, the relationship with the Ethiopian army was good and the Eritrean military was wearing Ethiopian army uniforms. At that time, the involvement of Eritrean troops was still a secret.

> *We wore the same uniform as the Ethiopians. […] We deal with them in a normal way. We eat with them. I think that all the things come from Ethiopia, like the food for example, the houses. All the things are from Ethiopia. It is normal. If the Eritrean army catches any group from Tigray or civilian people, they send them all to the Ethiopians.* (Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

People refusing to fight were put into prison. This included leaders who refused to fight, but those were later locked up in a town were unable to leave, according to the interviewee.

> *There were people who refused to fight. Now all of them, they are in prison. Most of them are in Mai Serwa. They are in very bad condition, like in any prison. […] Even some leaders rejected to fight, so the president Isayas sent them to prison first, then he released them. But they live in a closed area, it is like a prison. They banned them from leaving the town. They live in one town but they are banned from leaving the town.* (Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

People who were injured were sent either sent to Addis Ababa if they were far from Eritrea, but those close to the border were sent to an area the interviewee referred to as Glass, a military hospital, and they were not allowed any visitors.

> *They send them to Glass, an area called Glass in helicopter. Glass area is closed. No one goes inside Glass. Even when you have your brother or your son, you will not see him. For example, one woman knows that her son is injured in this hospital, then when she goes to the hospital to visit him, the army asks her: "Who told you? Who gave you this information?" Finally, she talks to them about the one, they brought the one and sent him to prison. She is with him. Now the two are in prison.*

(Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

This was part of the information blackout around the conflict. Soldiers were not allowed a phone, so they could not inform their families about what was going on in the war.

You know the Eritrean government closed all the telephone and contact from the area of Tigray. And no one from the army has a telephone. So no contact with anyone. The government took all telephones of people from the army. Just our leaders. (Interviewee 5009, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The soldier was able to escape because he sustained an injury unrelated to battle and was able to escape to Sudan. Other refugees confirmed the lack of information to the people of Eritrea about the war. "No one knows information [about the people who are in Tigray]. […] No one returned. […] Nothing from the TV." (Interviewee 5017, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Youth reported that they faced an increase of national service roundups, called *giffas*, after the start of the war. Both women and men reported this.

I know people [who have been rounded up]. They come from house to house. If you haven't got school, you are not students, they will come and you will go with them directly. (Focus group 5017, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, June 2021)

Some Eritreans who had family members in refugee camps in Ethiopia lost contact with them.

Now she [my sister who was kidnapped in Sinai] is in Ethiopia. She is in Shimelba. Our last contact with her was in this camp, but now after the war in Tigray, we don't know where she is exactly. (Interviewee 5003-1, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

One refugee who was in Hitsats after the start of the war was deported back by Eritrean authorities to Eritrea, where he spent four months in prison, before he managed to escape during a toilet break.

He said that particularly people who had deserted from the army were given long prison sentences.

> *When the war started, all the area is unsafe, so we decided to leave the camp. I wanted to leave to Sudan. I started the journey until the border. But in one area, the Eritrean army caught me and sent me again to Eritrea, to Barentu with a group. [They sent us over the border] By car. We are in a convoy of about 15 cars. It is army cars. Very big cars. A lot of people fit inside those cars. They divided us into two groups. The group who came from the camp, they allowed us, after two weeks of prison, to be released and to go to our family. But the other group, composed of soldiers who escaped from the army, they sent them to prison.* (Interviewee 5010, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

The disturbance of the Tigray war, as described above, had some direct impacts on the situation of people in Eritrea. National service roundups increased and those in the army were (under threat of) deployment, including non-army persons like prisoners. Information was kept under wraps. In addition, people lost contact with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, and some refugees were deported back to Eritrea. Some interviewees indicated they had fled due to these reasons.

Persecution in Sudan amidst economic hardship

In this part, the results will be presented of how the Eritrean refugees are currently adapting to the situation, this is referred as the 'assessment of the system', and whether there are any indications that absorption, recovery, and adaptation are taking place, or whether a critical transition has occurred. The two key issues that came up were the insecurity inside and outside the camps, and the increasing threat of human trafficking. The two situations that were identified in the analysis are: the strict situation in both the camps and outside the camps for the refugees restricting their abilities to work and access services and the threat of human trafficking preying on Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

Deportation and extortion inside and outside the camps

Eritreans arriving in the reception centres were separated from the arriving Tigrayans. In Hamdayete, there were two groups of Eritreans in a separate housing structure, and other newly arrived refugees were

in the reception centre of Wedsherify. Both of those locations were places of transit, but refugees remained there for weeks waiting to be transferred. Refugees complained about a lack of basic resources and medical care.

> *We have no food and no water. Even to cook, we don't have that. [...] We are not allowed to leave this area. [...] They keep telling us, "tomorrow, tomorrow". Every day, they say tomorrow. Now we have one month in this situation. [...] If you find a doctor, you will not find the medications.* (Focus group 5018, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

A main concern for the refugees was that they wanted to travel to Shegarab, the place where Eritrean refugees are housed; or conversely, not wanting to travel there, because they would not be able to work. Another key concern in the transit places is the fear for deportation to Eritrea by Sudanese authorities. The men in the focus group in Hamdayete were very concerned about deportation to Eritrea, after they had witnessed 6 persons being deported by Sudanese security:

> *They did that [deportation] for about 6 persons, they deported them already. Four days ago, they deported six people. […] Still, we are afraid of that, and those people were ten when they told them that they wanted to deport them, four of them went quickly, escaping, and they caught the other six and deported them. [...] In a car, it is a car of the [Sudanese] security.* (Focus group 5018, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Hamdayete, June 2021)

Tribal conflict in Sudan is also affecting some refugees in and around the camps. A group of refugees described how Eritreans were caught up in such conflicts, because they look like members of a particular Sudanese tribe (presumably the Beni Amer).

> *Now it is not safe, but at the time, it was safe. In Shegarab, I am not sleeping well, everything is not well in the issue of security. […] It has been going on now for around 2 years. It started because of the tribe conflict here in Kassala. The insecurity started at that time. [...] We look like the other Sudanese tribe. When there are two sides, some Sudanese they think we are with one side.* (Interviewee 5003-1, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

In addition, refugees still feel threatened by the long arm of the Eritrean government which infiltrates the refugee groups.

Interviewees were fearful of their names and faces becoming known. "I think that if the Eritrean government knows what I have told you, they will kidnap me from Wedsherify" (Interviewee 5005, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021). One woman said she could recognise those operatives by the looks in their eyes:

> *I worked with the government as a soldier and I know, I have the ability to distinguish. Looking in your eyes, I know if you are working with the government.* (Interviewee 5002, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

Whether or not the look in someone's eyes is enough to judge whether they are Eritrean government agents, the fear of encountering these operatives on the streets every day is intimidating.

Just like Tigrayan refugees, Eritrean refugees faced the choice of staying in a refugee camp or going out to try to find work. In a refugee camp, refugees could get a refugee card, but with it, you were not allowed to leave the camp unless you had special permission (rarely given). They stopped registering Eritreans in Khartoum, so to get the card, even Eritreans who have been in the country for longer need to travel back to the camps to be able to receive a permission card. The refugee card is desirable, because with it, you may be able to get a work permit – it is not legal, so you need to pay a bribe. But the alternative is to get a foreigner card, which states on it that you are not allowed to work:

> *This is a foreigner card. It is already expired. See here? Not permitted to work. This is from Khartoum, a Sudanese government card. Even if you have this, they may break it, and you can go to prison. If you get fined money and you cannot afford, the community, neighbours, relatives can take up a sharing to get you out from prison. You have this card as Eritrean, but you're not permitted [to work]. [Someone hands a UNHCR card to the interviewer]. You have this one, UN card, and sometimes you are asked for a work permit, which is so expensive. If you have a UNHCR card, they also ask for a work paper.* (Focus group 5031, a focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021)

Eritrean refugees, even those born in Sudan, cannot become Sudanese unless they are lucky with their tribal relations. The director of a Sudanese NGO explains how this is possible:

> *When it comes to Eritrea, you have the Beni Amer and so many other groups, who are border tribes, so you can find a Sudanese Beni Amer or an Eritrean Beni Amer. They do live in the lowlands near the Sudanese borders. And that area is a very rich, fertile land. And the government of Eritrea has always had the strategy of sending highlanders to lowlanders [driving lowlanders like Beni Amer off their land]. So, so many people, 100s of thousands of people, left this place claiming that they are Sudanese, benefitting from the corrupt system. So, they got their identity cards. […]. I can't understand, families [of Eritreans] living in Sudan since the 60s and not having any identity cards. You can find someone who entered Sudan two years ago who has a passport. The government has provided this to the Beni Amer because they can support the previous government.* (Interviewee 7006, interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021)

So, the interviewee implied that by having tribal relations and supporting the previous government, the government of Omar al Bashir, and some Beni Amer Eritreans were able to get privileges. However, the Eritreans are also discriminated against in many ways. A focus group in Khartoum explained that landlords would arbitrarily increase the rent to chase Habesha (Eritrean and Ethiopian) renters. The group said the situation got worse from January 2021 onwards, especially since the economic situation deteriorated. Eritreans and Ethiopians were also facing arrests from police officers, who could break your foreigner card in half or bring you to prison unless you paid them money.

> *Yes, sometimes they can bring you to prison. If there is a holiday, there is an increase in victims. Especially on holiday, when they need money. They scare you to make money. They don't ask you if you work or not. They just force you. […] I paid, and I got out. [...] Now, [they ask for] 150,000, 200–300 [thousand Sudanese] pounds – it depends, on the police officer.* (Focus group 5031, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021)

In addition to facing arrests by the police who may ask between 150,000 and 300,000 Sudanese pounds (between 350 and 700 USD[6]),

[6] Exchange rate calculated via Oanda.com dated 1 June 2021

the interviewees explained that Eritreans and Ethiopians were also targeted by robbers. They could also be extorted outside the villages; for example, the trip from Khartoum to Shegarab in order to get a refugee card, which is less often broken by police, and which allow to obtain a work permit through bribes, is dangerous.

> *My sister was here with me, and she got to Shegarab to get a UN ID. Eritrean smugglers were bringing her to Khartoum, but on the way, Sudanese smugglers kidnapped them. It happened yesterday.* (Focus group 5031, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021)

Facing the strain of the economic pressure, discrimination, inability to freely work and study, and the inability to obtain any permanent residence status, the Eritreans are under severe pressure in building up livelihoods in Sudan. Recently, the pressure increased for especially young Eritreans to move towards Europe.

The situation in the refugee camps, and outside, deteriorated severely after the war broke out in Sudan on 15 April, which happened after these interviews were conducted. Many of the refugees in the camps and within cities, such as Khartoum, had to flee (again) and without any safe places to go to (Interviewee 7007, communications over WhatsApp, 2023).

Threat of human trafficking increasing

The second issue that was identified in systematically changing the situation of the Eritrean refugees is the threat of the human trafficking networks. This threat is identified both within the camps and outside the camps. Eritreans who have stayed in Khartoum for a long time say it is getting worse: people taken, willingly or by force, to Libya.

> *Yes, yes, it happens a lot. Also from Khartoum. A lot of people, since January. The smugglers kidnap you, in collaboration with the police. […] People just disappear. They just go out of the house, and never come back. Then, you get a call from Libya.* (Focus group 5031, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021)

The youth were particularly targeted for being convinced to go to Libya. A mother whose daughter attempted to go to Libya explained how intermediaries in the camp tried to lure the youth out:

> *Smugglers are working but in another way. They are doing something for our children like washing their brains. They are speaking about Libya: "It is a very nice country, you will lose your age [youth] here in Wedsherify". We are suffering from this now, and many of our children want to leave now.* (Interviewee 5003.2, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

The woman's daughter, a young Eritrean, followed one of these intermediaries. Her testimony is a key to understanding the way networks towards Libya are organised from Sudan:

> *There is one Eritrean boy, who came with us. He wants to go to Libya. He planned everything and we feel that he is with us. He is on the bus and controls us. Now he is in Libya. […] The smuggler deals with this boy as free. If he brings 9 or 10 others, he can go for free. […] We get the normal bus from Kassala to Khartoum, but there is someone with us to protect us from the police. There are many questions on the road, especially for Eritreans. There are about two or three [check] points to Khartoum, but we have someone. The smuggler had given us all fake Sudanese IDs. I had another name.* (Interviewee 5003.3, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

The refugees we interviewed did not know the price of the journey to Libya. The girl explained that she had simply agreed with her smuggler that she would pay in Libya, by working. However, her mother knew what would happen: "For that reason, I am sick. They sent me to the hospital. Because I know my situation, I haven't got the money to give the ransom to people in Libya" (Interviewee 5003-1, interview with Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021).

The intermediaries knew the places where the refugees go. They often speak their language, they are from their culture and this is how they manage to convince them to take the road. Another woman explained:

> *Two days ago, I was in the office of UNHCR. I heard one speaking with the group: "Now the road to Libya is very good, the sea is very good these days". What happens if we can go? We live here in a very bad situation. They speak about the economic*

situation … (Interviewee 5003.3, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

The refugees interviewed say that they know the road is dangerous, but, as another girl who attempted to go to Libya explained, the information is not enough to dissuade young people from leaving. She explained:

> *I heard that the Libyan people deal with people in a very tough way. Some they detain them and some, they beat them. And I also heard that the sea is very difficult, that people die there. I heard that the Libyans haven't got respect for people, especially for girls and especially for the foreigners. [But] no one was thinking about those things. The main thing is: how can we leave? […] Our life is very hard and I see my mother living in a very bad situation so I try to help her.* (Interviewee 5003.3, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Kassala, June 2021)

Others appeared to underestimate the risks or thought that things will be better upon reaching Libya. One woman in a focus group interview said, "They know the way to Libya is so bad […] but they don't know how bad." (Focus group 5031, focus group interview by Smits, face-to-face, Khartoum, June 2021). Another one just knew about the desert:

> *It depends on what we hear from the people. It is the desert, so it is difficult. But if we reach Libya or Europe, things will be good. I am thinking about that.* (Interviewee 5011, interview by Smits and Wirtz, face-to-face, Wedsherifay, June 2021)

With increasingly poor situations for Eritrean refugees and increasing pressure to go to Europe, the risk of human traffickers had increased. The indications that kidnappings have also increased, together with the economic decline in Sudan, and this is concerning. This situation was investigated before the war in Sudan broke out. Indications from resource persons (Interviewee 7007, communications over WhatsApp, 2023) are that this threat has further aggravated.

Comparing the situations of Eritreans and Tigrayans

In this investigation we considered the situation of Tigray and Eritrean refugees who fled to Sudan during the time of the Tigray war and before the war in Sudan broke out. The reasons why they fled are

egregious circumstances and their situation, after they fled, is challenging.

In the analysis conducted, the situation of the Tigray and the Eritrean refugees was compared. The comparison served to isolate the factors that may give insight into the reasons and rationales as to whether the Tigray and Eritrean refugees would possibly return home and under which circumstances this would be the case. We used a conceptual framework that looks at their perceived situation as a perceived social system, which is disturbed, and we assessed the new circumstances of their situation. The original situation is referred to as the baseline situation.

The comparison shows that the Eritrean and Tigrayan situations differ in terms of all stages: the baseline situation, the disturbance, and the assessment of the new social system in which they are.

In Tigray, the baseline situation was perceived as relatively stable, with most interviewees content with their lives, but was completely disrupted by the war. The interviewees had all fled from experiences of brutal killings of civilians, under suspicion of fulfilling a role with the Tigray, but also just for being Tigrayan. It was accompanied by stories of brutal sexual violence, with elements of ethnic cleansing.

The situation that Eritreans face as a baseline is perceived as one of systematic repression, lack of rights and freedom, and a forced indefinite national service, particularly the military service, including forced round-up of youth to join the indefinite national service. The disturbance of the Tigray war has made their situation worse. The deteriorating situation concerned the increased round-up campaigns for the army, refugee refoulement from Tigray to Eritrea, and the deployment of unwilling and unknowing Eritreans, including prisoners, into battle. Those against this would be imprisoned.

Fleeing because of these factors, both groups of refugees ended up in the same area in Sudan, even if they were separated. They faced equally dire conditions in the reception centres and camps, as well as in urban settings. These conditions were also reported to be deteriorating by Eritrean refugees who had been there for a while. In addition, both groups faced the threat of human trafficking. For

Eritrean refugees, they reported that the intermediaries that came to persuade the youth to leave for Libya had got more intense, and that more people were leaving, being told lies about what they were facing. Eritrean refugees were more directly approached and enticed into human trafficking routes. Tigrayan refugees were divided between wanting to go back and taking the road to Libya. In the camps, intermediaries were already reported to be at work to persuade them to go, falling into the hands of human trafficking networks.

Furthermore, the aspects of access to information and denial to information were clear in the context of the war were clear from the refugees were spoke to. Tigrayan refugees stated that they lost touch with their families as they had to flee, and due to the connectivity blackout in Tigray, were not able to get in touch with them. However, hoping for a return in network, some stayed close to the border in Hamdayete hoping to connect with them. Eritrean refugees spoke about the information blackout around the war in Tigray. They received no information about the war. Soldiers were not allowed to bring their phones. There was no information about anyone deployed in the war either.

From the perspective of the Eritrean refugees, both those in Sudan for a longer time and those that recently fled, the circumstances would not allow them to return unless drastic changes would take place – both before and after the outbreak of the Tigray war. This appears to be a collective position among most Eritrean refugees. Thus, the refugees from Eritrea describe that they have come to rely on an increasingly unsafe system of extortion and human trafficking. The Tigrayan refugees that were interviewed, despite describing situations before the war that are relatively stable, also describe the pressure to rely on these same systems. Therefore, all Eritrean refugees describe that they have become part of an alternative system that does not leave room to return to Eritrea, and many Tigrayan refugees also expressed that they choose to try and find a way to Europe rather than to try and return to Tigray – becoming part of the same alternative system.

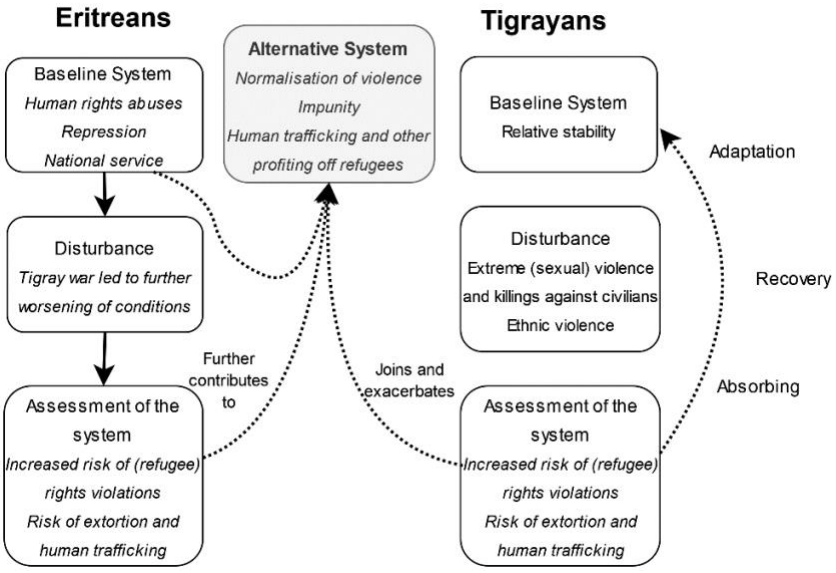

Figure 5.7. The disturbance of the Tigray war has led Tigrayan refugees to become victims of the alternative system already set in motion by the repression of Eritrean refugees

Source: Developed by the authors for this chapter

The transition is explained in the figure above, where it shows that Eritrean refugees describe they have already shifted into an alternative system where return is not possible, where human trafficking networks are the only slim option of escape, and the war has only worsened conditions; and that the war has caused many Tigrayan refugees to flee and now starting to describe a similar situation of normalisation of violence, impunity, human trafficking and other forms of profiting off refugees.

Discussion

Willingness to return

The narratives of the refugees show that Eritreans do not feel that they can return. A large portion of the Tigrayan refugees were also thinking of moving to Europe rather than returning – describing that human trafficking intermediaries were already coming to the camp, and that many of the youth were thinking of moving on. Although this chapter has described the perspective of only a small number of

the thousands of refugees, we feel that the narratives are representative of a larger collective, allowing us to answer the question of whether Eritreans and Tigrayans would be willing to return after the end of the Tigray war.

None of the Eritrean refugees we spoke to were considering return, despite the worsening conditions of extortion, the lack of safety and danger of human trafficking. For refugees from Tigray, many were already indicating that they would not return to Tigray, as the situation in Tigray was still relatively new (eight months after the outbreak of war). This could potentially be explained because the war in Tigray constituted such an extreme shift in circumstances that a critical transition indeed took place. This research suggests that the theoretical concept of hysteresis helps to explain the anticipation of refugees on returning to their country of origin. As explained by Scheffer *et al.* (2012), a critical transition can cause hysteresis, meaning that a simple return to the previous conditions is not enough for recovery.

In this case, the situation in Tigray would have to be significantly improved from the baseline situation for Tigrayan refugees to choose return. The situation of the Eritrean refugees causes a chain of transitions that drives them into human trafficking organisations which are active in the refugee camps. The human trafficking organisations are linked to the Eritrean regime – and its long arm abroad, which the refugees try to escape from. News articles suggest that Eritrean refugees traveling through Ethiopia to Kenya are facing a feared forced repatriation to Eritrea, after having been smuggled by human trafficking organisations to Kenya, while they were attempting to flee to South Africa. (Garowe Online, 2023). The overall situation in Eritrea is seen as a continuity of involvement in regional instability that is not ended by the end of the war in Tigray. The research shows that conditions for return are not in place as long as Eritrea remains active in regional instability through the indefinite and forced national service regime that it applies to all of its citizens.

The outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023 has made the position of refugees in Sudan significantly worse. Conversely, the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the federal government of Ethiopia

and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was signed in November 2022, putting an end to the hostilities. On 6 November 2023, the Ethiopian government announced that a referendum would settle the ongoing issue of the occupation of Western Tigray, offering the possibility for the normalisation of the situation in Tigray. However, a recent article in Africa Intelligence (Africa Intelligence, 2023) suggests that a 'brain drain' from Tigray is continuing amidst adverse conditions, including economic conditions.

Information black holes

In a recent publication on human trafficking of Eritrean refugees in Libya, the authors describe black holes in the digital landscape – places where access to connectivity is limited or deliberately controlled, as an explanatory factor for vulnerability to human trafficking (Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz & Smeets, 2023). The deliberate control over connectivity was apparent in the stories of Tigrayan and Eritrean refugees in this research. The complete communications blackout in Tigray caused refugees to be unable to contact their families; some stayed in makeshift reception centres at the border hoping for the chance that networks might return. Eritrean refugees related that they had no information about the war, even as Eritreans were being deployed. The soldiers were allowed no phones, and the Eritrean government closed off connectivity with Tigray. In addition, one refugee described how his friend left for Libya – leaving his phone behind. Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz and Smeets (2023) describe how those in black holes are forced to rely on others for information, putting them in a more vulnerable position. This chapter has documented that this is also visible in the situations of Eritrean and Tigrayan refugees, where deliberate denial to connectivity has put people at an even greater disadvantage.

Conclusions

This chapter sought to assess whether Eritreans and Tigrayans fleeing after the war in Tigray broke out would be willing to return. The chapter looked at the perspectives of the refugees through the lens of whether the war in Tigray constituted a critical shift in the system causing a transition from one system into an alternative system. It did

so by analysing the refugees' perspectives on their 'baseline' situation, the 'disturbance' i.e., the Tigray war, and the 'assessment of the system' in which the refugees expressed their current situation as refugees and their next steps.

Eritreans described how the Tigray war was another factor in an already dire human rights situation. None of them indicated that they were considering returning. For the Tigrayan refugees, while some spoke of return (to fight, or when the war would be over), many others spoke about moving on. Furthermore, the refugees stated that the new refugee camps were already the target of intermediaries for human traffickers, and that many of the youth were thinking about – or had already – tried to move on to Europe via Libya.

The chapter found that refugees described situations in which human rights abuses, violence, impunity, and human trafficking were worsening and becoming normalised. However, the refugees may feel that they cannot return without a significant improvement in the conditions compared to the 'baseline'. With the Cessation of Hostilities in Tigray in November 2022 and outbreak of war in Sudan in 2023, the refugees whom we interviewed in 2021 are now stuck in an even more complicated situation. It is important to do further research and to see if the theoretical model based on the theory on critical transitions can further help to explain why refugees return – or why they do not.

In the meantime, immediate measures should be taken, including targeted sanctions, by the international community to force the perpetrators of severe human rights abuses against civilians, refugees in particular, to be brought to justice.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Europe External Program in Africa (EEPA) for its support, through the project Europe-Africa Response to Human Trafficking and Mixed Migration Flows. We would like to thank the Sudanese Organization for Researches and Development (SORD) for their help with the fieldwork in Sudan. We would like to thank the refugees who shared their stories with us, often enduring pain and grief to do so. We thank the editorial team for their prompt support and guidance in the process from research formulation to the final copyediting steps. We are grateful for the double peer review team for their comments. We are also grateful to the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC) for the discussions on the topic of this chapter and for the collaboration it fostered among the authors. We also thank GAIC colleagues for their input.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out as part of a PhD study. Both authors cooperated on the collection and the analysis of the data for this chapter. Both authors collaborated on the drafting of the first version of the chapter. The first author designed the conceptual framework, completed the final draft of the chapter and addressed the comments from reviewers. The second author reviewed the chapter.

Ethical considerations

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on Content and Editorial Decisions'. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC #2020n13 on "Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in remote non-Western Communities"

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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