

# Eritrean Refugees from the Shimelba Refugee Camp

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The United States is currently in the process of resettling approximately 6,500 Eritrean refugees from the Shimelba Refugee Camp in northern Ethiopia. The refugees are mostly ethnic Tigrinya and Kunama who cannot safely return to Eritrea or settle permanently in Ethiopia. Those accepted for U.S. resettlement are joining a group of 700 Kunama refugees from Shimelba who were resettled in the United States in 2007. (A background-er on the 2007 cohort of Kunama is available at <http://www.cal.org/topics/ri/backgrounders.html>.)

This backgrounder provides basic information about the Tigrinya and Kunama refugees from the Shimelba Refugee Camp. It looks at their recent history in Eritrea and Ethiopia and their cultural attributes and socio-economic characteristics. It is intended primarily for Reception and Placement (R&P) agency staff and others assisting the newcomers with their resettlement needs.

## Who Are the Refugees in Shimelba, and How Did They Become Refugees?

About 63% of the refugees being processed are Tigrinya and 33% are Kunama. The rest are ethnic Afar, Bilen, and Saho. Single men between the ages of 17 and 59 make up the majority of the caseload. There are a small number of young women, elderly, and families. There are more families among the Kunama than the Tigrinya.

The Tigrinya are a major ethnic group in Eritrea, where they number about 2.2 million and make up 50% of the population. They are generally from the urban areas of Eritrea. Most have received some formal education and are literate.

The Kunama are a marginalized minority in Eritrea, mostly populating remote and fertile rural areas near the Ethiopian border. Most are not educated, and few are literate.

Both groups of refugees began fleeing into Ethiopia after the outbreak of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. Tensions between the countries had been high since Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 following a 30-year war, and in 1998, a border dispute sparked a 2-year conflict that cost the two countries hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of casualties.

Many of the Tigrinya in Shimelba fled Eritrea to escape harsh compulsory conscription into the Eritrean national service. Conscripts in Eritrea serve either in the military or on a civilian work gang, often for an indefinite length of time. The Kunama fled Eritrea to escape persecution by the Eritrean government, which accused the Kunama of siding with Ethiopia in the 1998-2000 war.

Whatever their reasons for fleeing Eritrea, refugees who repatriate risk persecution. In Eritrea, it is illegal to cross the border into an enemy country, and refugees who do so are viewed as collaborators with an enemy state.

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### The Need for Resettlement

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there is no acceptable alternative to third-country resettlement for the refugees in Shimelba. Those who return to Eritrea face persecution, and their politically sensitive presence in Ethiopia rules out local integration as an option. Moreover, there is no guarantee of safety in Shimelba. The renewal of conflict in the area remains a threat. Located in one of the most highly militarized regions in the Horn of Africa, the Shimelba Refugee Camp is near the border of Eritrea, within striking distance of artillery shells. Should a new war begin, the camp would not be safe for the refugee population.

### Refugee Camp Life

Shimelba Refugee Camp is located outside of Shiraro in Northern Ethiopia, about 45 kilometers from the Eritrean border. The climate is semi-arid. About 40 years ago, the area was dense forest with many wild animals. Today, after decades of environmental degradation, the landscape is barren. To find firewood, refugees must travel long distances or cut live trees. Water is scarce. Except for small streams in the rainy season, there is no water source near the camp.

Refugees live in two types of houses. The Kunama construct mud houses with grass- thatched tops, while the Tigrinya build mud brick houses with plastic sheeting covers or, in a few cases, corrugated iron sheeting. Because materials to construct houses are limited, living conditions are crowded, with five to eight people sharing a room. The houses have neither toilets nor running water.

Food is provided by the United Nations World Food Program. Refugees receive a standard monthly ration of wheat cereal, white bean legumes, lentils or peas, fortified vegetable oil, salt, and sugar. Many sell part or all of their rations for cash, which they then use for various household expenses. Many refugees report that their rations do not last the month.

The camp offers little opportunity for productive activity; boredom dominates daily life. Ethiopian government policy prohibits camp residents from working for wages and restricts most of them to the camp. Refugees found outside the camp without permits have been arrested and imprisoned. Men generally spend their time playing cards, shooting pool, chatting in small groups, and drinking coffee, tea, or *arake* (locally brewed liquor). Women prepare food, wash clothes, gather water and firewood, and take care of the children.

Life for young people in the camp is difficult and sometimes dangerous. Without the opportunity to obtain an education beyond high school or learn a vocational skill, young men feel that their lives are passing them by. Many of the young women in the camp live without the protection of parents or relatives. Some marry to gain protection from men, while others live alone or with other women.

### Cultural Characteristics

#### Languages

The Tigrinya speak Tigrinya, a Semitic language, also spoken by the Tigrinya of Ethiopia, and one of the two languages of government in Eritrea. Arabic, the other language of government, is spoken by a small minority of Tigrinya.

Because of the legacy of Ethiopian domination over Eritrea, many Tigrinya are able to speak Amharic, although they are reluctant to do so. In Eritrea, students are taught in their native language (mainly Tigrinya) in the early grades. English is taught as a foreign language beginning in Grade 2 and becomes the language of instruction in Grade 6 (at least in theory).

The Kunama speak their own language, Kunama. Those who are educated also speak Tigrinya. A few can communicate in Amharic and/or Arabic.

#### Religion

The Tigrinya are members of the Eritrean Orthodox (Coptic) Church. For the Tigrinya, their faith is central to their way of life. Believers accept the Bible as truth, but the canon includes books that are unique to the Coptic faith. Church services are conducted in Ge'ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is considered the holy church language, just as Latin once was in the Roman Catholic Church.

Of the Kunama refugees being processed for resettlement, 55% are Catholic, 16% are Protestant, and 16% are Muslim. The Kunama also practice a traditional religion, which is monotheistic but without the hierarchies and the formal practices of Islam or Christianity. Educated Kunama are usually Christian.

There are places of worship for each of the major religious groups in the camp, and most refugees attend service regularly. There are several Bible study sessions during the week for Christians, and on Fridays, Muslim refugees go to mosque and socialize in cafes afterwards. Most refugees fast according to the requirements of their faith. The different religious groups appear to live together in the camp harmoniously.

## Family and Gender Roles

In a typical Tigrinya community in Eritrea, men are the basic providers, while women stay home and take care of the families. Children also assist their parents at home, with girls playing a larger role than boys. Although most Tigrinya are from the urban areas of Eritrea and many women favor Western dress, notions about the role of women remain traditional.

Kunama women work at home, cooking, cleaning, and raising children. They do not usually work outside of the home. Women are given fewer opportunities to attend school than men. Elderly women, however, hold a great deal of power over their younger family members. The Kunama place strong emphasis on relationships with the extended maternal family, and when a mother dies, her relatives take over the care of her children, even if the children's father is still alive.

There are generational differences in gender roles among refugees in the camp. Generally, older married women are homemakers, while younger unmarried women are better educated and less traditional in outlook and behavior. This generation gap is partly the result of a young camp population that has come of age outside of a traditional family framework.

The high percentage of males among the Tigrinya camp population has been a source of problems. Without the stabilizing force of families—the primary unit of society for social control—traditional customs and norms are loose in the camp, compared to Eritrean society back home. Among young men, there is competition for women. Many women are pressured into marriage; some face sexual harassment or rape.

## Leadership

Each group in Shimelba has its traditional forms of leadership, but because the camp is dominated by young, single men, few elders are available to influence and guide the camp community.

For the camp as a whole, there is a Central Committee that is elected by the camp population. The system also includes zone and block leaders. The role of the committee is to represent the refugees on various issues, to meet with officials from governmental and non-governmental organizations, and to support camp management.

## Food and Dietary Restrictions

Both the Tigrinya and the Kunama eat *injera*, a kind of flat bread, served with a sauce made of beans, split peas, split lentils, and sometimes meat. Refugees make this bread from wheat flour; they also bake a traditional bread called *himbasha*. The Kunama generally do not eat pork. Muslims in the camp have had trouble finding meat that meets Islamic dietary standards.

Orthodox (Coptic) Christians and Muslims fast. For Orthodox Christians, fasting generally restricts the eating of animal products. Orthodox Christians fast every Wednesday and Friday, on special religious holidays, and for about 50 days before Easter. In total, these fasting days add up to over half the year. Eritrean Muslims, like Muslims everywhere, fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. During this time, observant Muslims beyond the age of puberty refrain from eating and drinking from dawn until sunset.

## Resettlement Considerations

### Family Size and U.S. Ties

As noted previously, there are relatively few families in the camp. A small number of refugees have friends or family members living in the United States.

### Health

Overall, the population is healthy. There are, however, HIV-positive persons and those living with AIDS. These individuals are highly discriminated against and stigmatized. Some refugees are disabled, and some women have been victims of sexual or gender-based violence.

Few Tigrinya use traditional healers. Instead they prefer to see doctors in Addis Ababa. In contrast, the Kunama consult traditional healers, most of whom are women. The Kunama do not object to Western medicine, but treatment should include clear instructions (for example, how to take medicine).

### Exposure to Modern Amenities

The Tigrinya tend to think of themselves as a “civilized” people close to Western culture, as a result of the Italian colonization of Eritrea. They are generally familiar with phone cards, modern toilets, grocery stores, and household cleaning products, and those from the capital city of Asmara have experienced public transportation.

In contrast, the Kunama, who lived a more rural existence in Eritrea, have not been exposed to many household appliances, although most appear to know what a refrigerator is and what food ought to be stored in it. Children seem to fear modern toilets, and their use, although discussed in overseas cultural orientation, will need more explanation after arrival in the United States.

Refugees from rural Eritrea who have lived in Shimelba for several years have been exposed to camp resources and facilities. A satellite television in the camp has exposed the refugees, at least visually, to life abroad.

### Work Experiences and Vocational Training

Tigrinya refugees referred for resettlement have served in the military, run small businesses, and farmed. Most Kunama men worked as farmers and cattle herders in Eritrea, and most women worked as housewives.

Because refugees are not permitted to work outside the camp, fewer than 10% have worked in Ethiopia. These 10 % have worked in Shimelba, mostly running small businesses—restaurants, beauty salons, grocery stores, and retail shops. Others have been employed by non-governmental organizations providing services in the camp.

Some vocational skills training is available in Shimelba. Three to four hundred refugees receive training in carpet making, electrical installation, dyeing and silk printing, tailoring, knitting, embroidery, and leather craftwork. The Tigrinya seem to show more interest in skills training classes than do the Kunama.

### Education, Literacy, and English

Most of the Tigrinya have had some education and are literate in their own language. Many have completed Grade 10 and some have studied at the university level, although opportunities for higher education in Eritrea are limited because the government targets young men for military service.

Most Kunama have received no formal education; about 20% are literate in their own language. Kunama who are literate in their own language may be able to read and write Tigrinya and Amharic.

Preschool, primary, and secondary school education is available in the camp. Education is provided up to Grade 10. Refugee children who pass Grade 10 can attend high school in the nearby town of Shiraro.

In the camp, all children of elementary-school age are enrolled in school. The dropout rate, however, is high, especially among girls, who are much less likely than boys to receive family support for education and often leave school to help at home or get married.

Informal education exists in Shimelba. For example, through an educational project called “Circles for Change,” adult refugees discuss issues of interest. Survival English classes are also available for students who want to improve their English language skills.

It is estimated that about 25% of those referred for U.S. resettlement speak some English.

### Cultural Traditions that Might Conflict with U.S. Practices

Though most Kunama appear to have only one spouse, many men and women have children with multiple partners, even after marriage. It is common for young women to marry much older men.

The Kunama practice traditional medicine, and some of these practices—such as slashing eyelids to treat an irritated eye, burning the cheeks to treat chronic headaches, and cutting the epiglottis in both males and females—will need to be addressed in the United States. Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) is widely practiced among the Kunama. FGC is practiced among the Tigrinya, but it appears to be declining in popularity.

Two other Kunama practices are worth noting. The first is the ritual slaughter of a goat, cow, or sheep when a family member dies. The second takes place when a young man comes of age. At this time, his head is shaved and he is sent into the wilderness to slaughter an animal. The Kunama say that they are willing to modify this coming-of-age ceremony in the United States.

### Cultural Orientation

Refugees accepted for U.S. resettlement receive 18 hours of CO training over a 3-day period. The training is funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugee, and Migration (PRM) and provided by the Church World Service/Overseas Processing Entity Nairobi (CWS/OPE Nairobi). For security reasons, CO staff do not travel to the camp. Instead, the refugees are taken to Shire, a western Tigray regional hub 2-3 hours by vehicle from the camp. Training takes place in a hotel hall or a rented building.

There are three objectives to the training:

- To inform participants of the resettlement processes and systems
- To help participants develop realistic expectations of life in the United States
- To inform participants of the skills and attitudes necessary for a more positive resettlement experience

CO training covers all topics outlined in the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) guidebook *Welcome to the United States*. Sessions are learner-centered and participatory, taking into consideration the unique needs of the group receiving training. Trainers use role plays, group exercises, debates, pictures, and videos to convey key concepts. Sessions with the Kunama, who have had limited exposure to modern life, include a visit to one of the onsite restrooms to familiarize them with Western-style toilets.

In addition to the orientation offered by CWS/OPE Nairobi, from 2009-2010 the International Rescue Committee (IRC) provided a supplementary CO program in Shimelba to refugees who had been approved for U.S. resettlement. Taught over the course of several weeks, the IRC course expanded on topics introduced by CWS/OPE, exploring in more detail areas of particular importance and need. The orientation was delivered in conjunction with IRC's Community Services and Education programs, which include survival English and ESL courses for advanced learners.

## **Caseworker and Placement Considerations**

In assigning caseworkers and housing to new arrivals, resettlement staff should be aware of the following:

- Although the Tigrinya speak Amharic, some may prefer not to use it.
- The Kunama have a long-standing history of conflict with the Tigrinya.
- While there is some tension between Eritreans and Ethiopians, conflict between the two groups should not be an issue in the United States.

## **Other Considerations**

Because of their lack of formal education and exposure to modern amenities, the Kunama can be expected to require more resettlement assistance than the Tigrinya.

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This Backgrounder was developed by CAL and CWS/OPE Nairobi with contributions from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

# At a Glance:

**Total Cases:** 4197  
**Total Individuals:** 5435  
**Average Case Size:** 1  
**Country of Origin:** Eritrea

## Ethnicity/Native Languages\*

Tigrinya (55%)  
 Kunama (39%)  
 Afar, Bilen, and Saho (7%)

\*Total is more than 100% due to rounding

## Other Languages

Many Tigrinya speak Amharic and a small minority speak Arabic. Educated Kunama speak Tigrinya, while a few speak Amharic and/or Arabic.

## Literacy

Most Tigrinya are literate in their own language. About 20% of the Kunama are literate in their own language. Those who are literate in Kunama may be literate in Tigrinya and Amharic.

## Exposure to Modern Amenities

The Tigrinya are generally familiar with modern amenities. Most Kunama are not.

## Work Experience

Tigrinya refugees referred for resettlement have served in the military, run small businesses, and farmed. Most Kunama men worked as farmers and cattle herders in Eritrea, and most women worked as housewives.

## Vocational Skills Training

Refugees in Shimelba may have received training in carpet making, electrical installation, dyeing and silk printing, tailoring, knitting, embroidery, and leather craftwork.

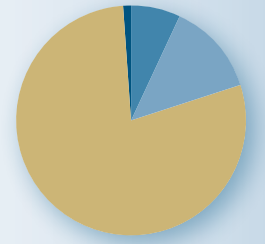
Editor: Donald A. Ranard  
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# Eritrean Refugees from the Shimelba Refugee Camp

**Gender:** Female 24% Male 76%

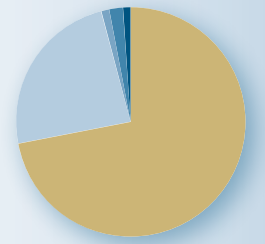
## Ages

0-4	7%	●
5-17	13%	●
18-59	79%	●
60+	1%	●



## Marital Status

Single	72%	●
Married	24%	●
Separated	1%	●
Divorced	2%	●
Widowed	1%	●



## Religion

Orthodox (Generally Tigrinya)	56%	●
Catholic	25%	●
Christian	7%	●
Moslem	7%	●
Other or not disclosed	6%	●

