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The Return Experiences of Amhara Internally Displaced Persons in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The displacement of ethnic Amharas in Oromia is linked with false historical narratives, ethnic federalism, and proliferation of non-state armed groups in the region. The situation intensified after 2018 when global attention focused on the reforms of the new prime minister and his Nobel Peace Prize. This article examines the experiences of Amhara Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who rejected and accepted the state-led return program implemented between February and May 2024. Data were collected from China Camp IDPs through interviews and focus group discussions in August 2024. Findings reveal that the return process was implemented under coercive conditions. Upon return, IDPs faced insecurity, lack of follow-up and support, and significant gap between expectations and reality. These conditions exposed many returnees either re-displacement to previous shelters or to other peaceful regions. The study recommends return programs be implemented in accordance with the UN guiding principles on IDPs and relevant legal frameworks.

Keywords: Amhara IDPs, Conflict-Induced Displacement, Durable Solutions, Return, Ethnic Conflict

Introduction

Ethiopia has recorded the highest number of IDPs of any single country in 2021. This high number of IDPs continued during 2022 and 2023, making it the third most affected country at global level next to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ukraine (IOM, 2023). Although there are other natural factors, the adoption of ethnic federal system launched since 1991 has played a significant role for the rising of IDPs (Dereje and Lietaert, 2022). The system created a platform for political parties to mobilize their electorate-based ethnicity (Bekele, 2022). This ethnic polarization within a diverse of more than 80 ethnic groups widens local and armed conflicts in ethnic manner (Yigezaw et al., 2019, Solomon, 2025). Some of the inter ethnic conflicts were, but not limited, Oromo-Somali, Somali-Afar, Amhara -Oromo, Amhara-Tigre, Gedeo-Guji and Amhara-Kimant (Alemu, 2023). The contradictory narratives regarding state history, national hero, past emperors, regional border claims, national flag and the constitution added fuel for inter ethnic conflicts (Bekele, 2022).

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Labelling the Amhara ethnic group as “oppressor” of others in Ethiopia was first introduced by fascist Italy to achieve its colonial ambition by creating internal contradictions among Ethiopians (Bekalu,2023). After its defeat at the battle of Adwa in 1896, Italy redefined its colonial interest under the cover of liberating non-Amharas and non-Christians and civilizing the state (Birhanu,2023). This discourse played a significant role in shaping the Ethiopian student movement (ESM) during 1960s and 1970s, particularly in framing their approach to the question of nationalities (ethnic groups or tribes) in Ethiopia. Walelign, one of a student leader in ESM in his article mentioned that the diverse culture, language, and identity of nationalities in Ethiopia have been assimilated and dominated by pseudo Ethiopianists of Amhara or Amhara-Tigre ruling class (Walelign,1969). However, I argue that the feudal system has a structural oppression against all ethnic groups. The peasant rebellions in different parts of the state during the second half of 20th century in Gojjam, Gedeo, Bale and Tigray were oppositions to the system.

The ESM created various Anti-Amhara ethno-nationalist and secessionist political organizations including Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in mid 1970's. TPLF began armed struggle in Tigray with a political manifesto “The Tigray People’s national struggle is anti -Amhara, Anti-imperialist and Anti-Feudal” (TPLF Manifesto: 1976:18). OLF also during its early days of establishment consider Ethiopia as an Abyssinian empire² imposed on Oromo people (Bekele, 2022). Both TPLF and OLF have their share in ousting the Derg military government (Bekele, 2022). They shared power in the 1991 transitional government of Ethiopia (TGE) and technically supported the displacement of ethnic Amharas from different regions including In Oromia, Benishangul, Afar, Southern Ethiopia (Bekalu,2023). Later on, OLF withdrew from the transitional government and restarted armed struggle in Eritrea. It was designated as a terrorist group by the Ethiopian parliament. On the other hand, TPLF along with Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern Ethiopia People’s Democratic Front (SEPDEF) formed a coalition named Ethiopian People Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF) from 1989-2019. Each of the four political groups in EPRDF represented the different ethnic groups in the country. Although TPLF represented the minority ethnic group³, it was dominant party within the coalition till 2018 (Bekalu, 2019).

The Youth protests in Amhara and Oromia regions⁴ and alliance of regional parties within EPRDF removed the dominant TPLF from central power (Solomon,2022). This political change happened in 2018 introduced an ethnic Oromo prime minister, release of political prisoners and the remove of TPLF from its core power for the last 27 years to the periphery (Semir, 2019). The new Prime minister Abiy Ahmed changed EPRDF to Prosperity party in December 2019. The new party through its *Medemer* or coming together ideology incorporated the minority ethnic parties marginalized by EPRDF. However, TPLF refused to be member of prosperity (Freeman, 2020).

In August 2018, OLF and OPDO⁵, the then ruling party in Oromia, signed a peace agreement in Eritrea to remove OLF from terrorist list, invite OLF leaders to join peaceful struggle and disarm its soldiers (Damena,2023). However, internal split with in OLF made some leaders to

² Abyssinia was the former name of Ethiopia. It is mainly used to express the northerners or in short Amhara and Tigray

³ TPLF represent six percent of the total Ethiopian population

⁴ Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups constitute 62 percent of the total Ethiopian population

⁵ OPDO means Oromo People Democratic Organization. Now its name is changed to Oromia prosperity party.



advocate pro-government stand while the military wing named OLA or OLF -Shene began armed struggle in western Oromia⁶. The armed movement of OLF-Shene imposed a threat on ethnic Amharas living in Oromia region.

Ethnic Amharas living in Oromia region were relocated by the Derg government's resettlement policy due to 1984 famine (Bekalu, 2018). Some of them were also moved for better job opportunity due to demography pressure in the northern part of the country (Megersa and Gizachew, n.d).

The targeted killing and displacement of ethnic Amharas which started in 1991 was intensified in the post-2018 period (European Centre for Law and Justice, 2024, Solomon, 2025). Notable incidents include the June 2020 massacres in Shashemane, Zeway, Dera, and Arsi villages, where 239 people were reportedly killed (European Centre for Law and Justice, 2024). The attacks have been particularly severe and recurrent in the Wollega zones of Oromia, with well-documented incidents occurring in Gawa Qanqa, Gimbi, and Qellem Wollega between 2020 and 2022.

The displacement has historical and political causes. Historically, OLF-shene and Oromo ethno nationalists consider the Amharas as settlers and ancestors of Emperor Menelik whom they believe the Oppressor and colonizer of Oromo (Bekele, 2022). The recent speeches of the president of Oromia "We broke the spine of Neftegna⁷ who broke us" and "we won the gamble by crossing the Abbay river through convivence and confuse" have deep political implications.

While the government attributes these attacks to the Oromo Liberation Army (also referred to as OLF-Shene, hereafter "Shene"), displaced Amharas often mentioned the collaboration of local government authorities with Shene (Eyayu and Emile, 2023). In 2021, the Ethiopian Parliament officially designated Shene as a terrorist organization⁸.

The shift of Ethiopian National Defence Force from Oromia to Tigray region following the war in 2021 gave Shene the opportunity to control western and south western Oromia (Damena, 2023). The deployment of federal forces left ethnic Amharas vulnerable to physical attacks by Shene (Solomon, 2025).

As the violence escalated, ethnic Amharas fled to the Amhara region by crossing jungles and difficult situations (Solomon, 2025). It took up to a month to arrive on foot. Ethnic affiliation and, in some cases, ancestral ties were the main factors influencing their choice of destination. Currently, these IDPs are residing in various camps across the Amhara region including in Gojjam, Shewa and Wollo provinces. Many of them have experienced secondary or tertiary displacement due to subsequent conflicts, including the 2020 war between the Ethiopian government and Tigray regional forces. Their current shelter area is under a state of emergency following the outbreak war between government forces and Fano militant

⁶ OLF is named differently by different people. For instance, its leaders and Oromo activists call it Oromo Liberation Army. The government call it OLF-Shene or Shene.

⁷ *Neftegna* or rifleman is usually used to refer the Amhara ethnic group.

⁸ The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is an Oromo-based guerrilla group advocating for the self-determination of the Oromo people (see *OLF-OLA Political Manifesto*, 2023). The group emerged as a splinter faction from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) following the Asmara peace agreement with the Ethiopian government. The Ethiopian authorities commonly refer to it as "OLF-Shene" or simply "Shene." The OLA maintains a strong presence in western Oromia, particularly in the Wollega and Illubabur regions (Damena, 2023).

groups in the Amhara region since August 2023⁹. A study conducted by Eyayu and Emile in 2023 explained IDPs living situation as overcrowded and 77 percent of the respondents have no basic needs. Services are intermittent and below target due to absence of funding, insecurity and poor coordination (ES/NFI,2025).

Rather than promoting local integration with host communities or resettlement in new areas, the government of Ethiopia has prioritized the return of IDPs to the Oromia region as the preferred durable solution. It conducted three rounds return on 4,300 IDPs between February and May 2024 (OCHA, June 10, 2024 Report). The return program has generated mixed reactions. While the government initially declared the process would be voluntary and based on informed consent, many IDPs reported experienced pressure and coercion. As a result, this article addresses the following questions: First, what were the concerns of IDPs regarding the return program? Second, what was the experiences of IDPs in the return program?

The participants involved in this study are two groups of people. Those who do not accept the return and those who re-displaced after involved in the return. I argue that implementing a return without solving the ethnic political tensions and prevailed security threats is tantamount with exposing IDPs to death. The return did not look actual return. Rather, it was a temporary relocation to extremely non-safe place. None of the returnees were able to visit their original home. Generally speaking, the UN guiding principles on IDPs and other legal frameworks signed by the Ethiopian government are largely overlooked.

The findings demonstrate several key points. First, the return of IDPs in Ethiopia is closely linked to the broader ethnic and political structure of the state. Second, the return process was not implemented in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement or other legal frameworks ratified by the Ethiopian government. Third, the return failed to achieve its intended goal of a durable solution, as the majority of returnees experienced re-displacement that began within one week of arrival.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the return experiences of Amhara IDPs originally displaced from Oromia Region and currently residing in China camp in Debre Birhan city, North Shewa Zone. Qualitative method was employed because it is well suited to understand lived experiences, perceptions, and social contexts (Hennink et al., 2020). The study used the UN guiding principles on IDPS as a framework to assess the return process.

In Debre Birhan city, there are three IDPs camps namely China, Woyneshet (07) and Bakelo that together comprises 23,000 IDPs. China camp was purposively selected due to its large IDP population approximately holding 12,000 individuals, its implementation of return programs, and its proximity to Addis Ababa, which facilitated logistics and internet access¹⁰. The study was focused on two groups of IDPs namely those who did not accept the return and those who re-displaced after return.

⁹ Fano is an armed guerrilla group with a strong base in Ethiopia's Amhara region. The group previously supported the federal government in its efforts to defeat TPLF. However, following the peace agreement between the federal government and the TPLF in 2022, the authorities initiated disarmament operations targeting on Fano. This action triggered a full scale war across the Amhara region beginning in August 2023.

¹⁰ Mobile data network during data collection period was restored in Zone and regional towns since August 2024. But it is still closed in woreda and kebele areas.

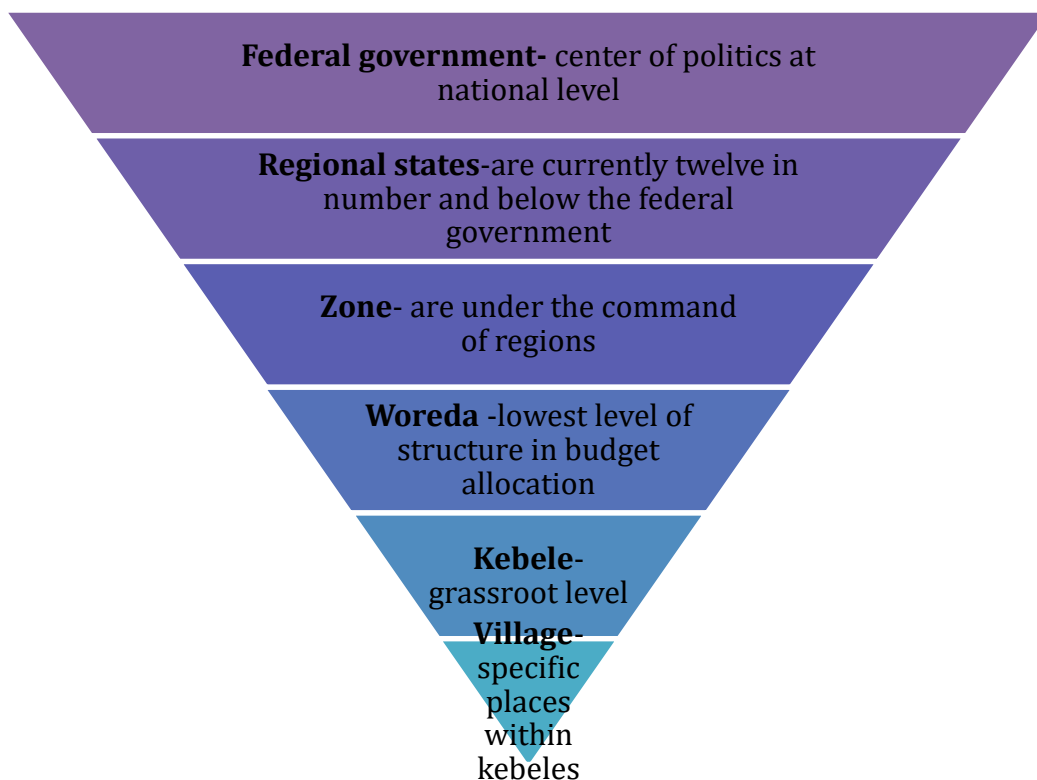


Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The camp coordinator served as a key gatekeeper and helped identify more than half of the participants due to his long-term engagement and familiarity with camp residents. Additional participants were identified through referrals from initial interviewees. Participants have family members, relatives, or friends who participated in the return program.

Given the volatile security situation and state of emergency in the Amhara region, the study underwent rigorous ethical reviews. Approval was obtained after multiple revisions, and data collection was authorized by the Debre Birhan city administration. Ethical safeguards included verbal informed consent, use of audio recording only, anonymization of participants through pseudonyms, and careful handling of sensitive data were applied.

Fieldwork was conducted by a trained research assistant¹¹ who speak Amharic, a common language used during interviews and FGDs. Interview and FGD guides were translated into Amharic and included mostly structured questions, with some semi-structured components to allow follow-up probing. Prior to data collection, extensive preparation and coordination were conducted remotely to address security risks, ethical considerations, participant interaction, consent procedures, and data management.

Administrative Hierarchy Structures in Ethiopia



¹¹ The research assistant is a lecturer in Debre Birhan University who has rich experience in data collection. His education level is Masters.

Data was collected in August 2024 through in-depth interviews and FGDs who displaced from different parts of Oromia region¹². While the interview was significant to listen subjective experiences, the focus group discussion helped to triangulate the accuracy of various responses through discussion. In-person interview was conducted with eleven IDPs. Two FGDs were conducted, each consisting of six participants, and were divided by sex to encourage women's participation and reduce the influence of patriarchal power dynamics. Women participants experienced emotional distress when recalling their displacement and return experiences. One interviewee withdrew from the interview since she felt discomfort.

Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with consent, shared securely, and reviewed continuously to improve data quality. Data were manually transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically. Responses with similar meanings were grouped into themes, which were then interpreted to produce coherent findings. Direct quotations from participants were used to strengthen the analysis.

Operational Definition of Terms

IDPs, according to UN guiding principle, refers to people who uprooted from their previous home to rescue their life due to natural and man made disasters without crossing the sovereign territory of their country.

Durable Solution of IDPs, according to Inter Agency Standing Committee (ISAC) framework, refers when IDPs restart regular life without expecting support from government or non governmental organizations. This could be achieved through return, resettlement or integration with local community.

Return of IDPs means the arrival of IDPs to their previous home and habitual place of residence.

Legal Frameworks on IDPs Durable Solutions

There are various international and continental legal frameworks developed by concerned stakeholders to solve the problems of IDPs through a sustainable way. Member states who signed the protocols have the responsibility to implement the provisions to ensure displaced persons feel safe. Some of these legal frameworks include United Nations guiding principle on IDPs, IASC frameworks and Kampala conventions.

The UN guiding principle on IDPs was prepared by the UN secretary Generals special representative on IDPs in 1998. The provisions are developed to guide governments, non governmental organizations and other stakeholders in their way to support IDPs which is compatible with humanitarian law and human rights. The thirty principles have provisions that deals on preventing displacement, protecting during displacement and solutions after displacement occurred. Principle 28 of the UN guiding principle on IDPs stated responsible authorities to support the return, local integration or resettlement choices of displaced people. It also provide IDPs the right to repossess or get compensation in case when their property is destructed or looted by another person.

The IASC framework on Durable solutions for IDPs was developed in 2010 after a revision was carried out by the cooperation of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the

¹² There is no improved security while preparing this manuscript as of February 2026.



United Nations Development Programme, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Environment Programme and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and a support from Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. The framework is prepared to serve as a reference for international humanitarian organizations, governments and IDPs to make decisions on durable solutions. It also emphasizes the need to search for durable solutions for IDPs through local integration with the host society, integration to other areas of the country or return to their previous area of origin. The process takes time till IDPs begin to stand by themselves and resume their normal life. The provision stated "Under no circumstances should IDPs be encouraged or compelled to return or relocate to areas where their life, safety, liberty, or health would be at risk." The absolute right to decide which solution works for every person relies on IDPs themselves. The Framework for Durable solution allows IDPs to participate in the planning and management of durable solutions without any coercion from the government or non-state armed groups (The Brookings Institution, 2010). Providing information in languages understood by all IDP groups through public assemblies, mass media or any other means of communication is essential for inclusive decision-making (ISAC, 2010). Returns shall be carried out after careful assessment of the area by IDPs' representatives, reasons for return, as well as local political and conflict conditions that could endanger returnees (Brookings Institution, 2010). Any kind of push factors in the shelters with the intent to let IDPs accept any durable solution alternatives is not acceptable. Returns are encouraged when there are chances of a better future to implement the solution in a sustainable way. All detailed information about the plans, existing real situations and solutions to face possible challenges must be provided for displaced persons. IDPs should also be consulted during developing laws on reconciliation and transition justice. The framework put eight parameters to measure the success of durable solutions. These are safety and security, adequate standard of living, access to livelihoods, restoration of housing, land and property, access to documentation, family reunification, participation in public affairs, and access to effective remedies and justice. The former combatants have to be disarmed, demobilized and integrate to their community. The presence of international peacekeepers that promote peace after conflict is also an effective strategy of durable solution if it is supported by local governments' capacity to take over the next steps after the withdrawal of international peacekeepers.

Compatible to the above provisions is the African Union Convention for the protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa in short named as Kampala Convention. The convention was adopted in 2009 but came into force in 2012. The convention is now signed by 55 countries in Africa including Ethiopia. It mandates signatory states to enable IDPs make free and informed choices regarding whether to return, integrate locally, or relocate, and to consult IDPs on these options to ensure their participation in finding sustainable solutions.

The convention, like the previous frameworks, focuses on three important areas. These are prevention of displacement, protection and humanitarian assistance during displacement and searching for sustainable durable solutions. Article XI of the convention speaks national governments to facilitate the lasting solutions for IDPs based on voluntary and well-informed basis. These choices are similar with UN and IASC frameworks namely return, local integration and resettlement.

Returns should ideally be confirmed by independent human rights monitoring bodies, and the social, economic, and political environments must be assessed to ensure safety, access to services, and conflict-free conditions (Reilly and Risser, 2000; Arowolo, 2000; Bereket and Kiya, 2023; Wanninayake, 2019; Le Rutte, 2024).

Durable Solutions for IDPs In Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Durable Solution Initiative was developed in 2019 via the joint cooperation of the Ethiopian government, United Nations and Non governmental Organizations (Naol, 2022). The initiative has incorporated the Inter agency Standing Committee frameworks on Durable Solutions. It is said to be achieved when IDPs are able to resume their life like non-displaced persons without help from humanitarian organizations and governments for their needs. It comprises the guidelines for return, resettlement and local reintegration of IDPs. The National Disaster and Risk Management Committee was organized at federal level to respond to questions related with IDPs (Rabel, 2022). As observed in 2017-2018 Oromo-Somali conflict, finding durable solution is attached with political willingness, commitment and resource availability (Rabel, 2022). A study conducted on Amhara IDPs displaced from Oromia region also shows the displaced persons have no trust on the power and commitment of the local government (Eyayu and Emile, 2024).

The return intentions of IDPs in Ethiopia is influenced by different push-pull factors. According to Thompson et al. (2023), push-pull factors are critical determinants influencing IDPs' decisions to return or remain displaced. Push factors such as lack of basic services, discrimination, fear, violence, and pressure within camps can compel IDPs to seek alternative places (Wanninayake, 2019; Le Rutte, 2024). Poor camp conditions, gender-based violence, poor hygiene, disease, and violence in camps significantly influence return decisions (Forced Migration Review, 2024, Salborn, 2010). In some cases, governments deliberately limit camp quality or locate camps in difficult areas to make conditions less comfortable, indirectly encouraging return (Patel, n.d.). This experience was observed in Gedeo IDPs in Gotiti shelter in which the government blocked aid while ninety percent of IDPs have no return interest to Oromia (Gardner, 2019). Pull factors of return includes compensation, property restoration, improved security, access to ancestral land, and the desire for self-reliance all increases return rates (Salborn, 2010).

According to the workshop conducted in May 2004, IDPs in Ethiopia chose to return than other alternative durable solutions since majority of the displaced persons are farmers that needs land for production (Rabel, 2022). However, insecurity and lack of livelihood opportunities were identified as a challenge. The more conflicts are protracted, the less chances IDPs have to return (Ferris and Kerwin, 2023). Sometimes, returnees who went back to their original areas found difficult to stay sustainably due to fear of possible conflicts and poor livelihood opportunities (Rabel, 2022). This re-displacement was widely seen on Gedeo IDPs who were forcefully returned to West Guji of Oromia (Gardner, 2019). Insecurity impede return and resulted for prolonged camp duration and searching alternative solutions by IDPs themselves (Rabel, 2022).

Trauma and bad memories about the place they left remains to be a challenge to return Amhara IDPs displaced from Oromia region (Eyayu and Emile, 2023). Economic challenges like financial support and access to arable land remains a pervasive challenge of durable solutions in Somali region (Bereket and Kiya, 2023).



On the other hand, a research conducted in Southern Ethiopia due to ethnic conflicts between Gedeo-Guji and Oromo-Somalia preferred local integration than return (Bewunetu and Getahun, 2024). Ethnic similarity with the host community, age, insecurity and loss of property and livelihood are presented as a reason for their decision. Despite the different choices of IDPs, the government gives priority for return despite the presence of challenging situations (Bereket and Kiya, 2023). According to Rabel (2022), local integration and resettlement in to another area is impossible due to the necessity of land for their farm and raising their cattle. Infrastructures like hospitals, schools, road and water services are scarce and rarely available in resettlement areas (Mehreteab, 2024). Contrary to this, some regional governments like Oromia are able to arranged resettlement lands and transportation services for its nationals displaced from Somali regional state (OCHA, 2018).

Limitations of the study

The study did not include the views of returnees who still remain in Oromia region due to insecurity and internet shutdown in the area. The study also lacks to incorporate the views of government and humanitarian workers as the issue was highly politicized.

Results

Most ethnic Amhara IDPs currently sheltered in China Camp were displaced from East Wollega, West Wollega, West Shewa, and South West Shewa Zones of Oromia Region. Majority of them are farmers who were displaced four years ago due to their identity. However, there are also merchants and government civil servants among them. The population includes diverse age groups, ranging from children to the elderly. In terms of religion, the IDPs include both Muslims and Christians.

Their area of origin have experienced a strong presence of OLF–Shene, which has significantly affected security conditions. Currently, the IDPs are facing severe challenges, including insufficient humanitarian support, malnutrition, unemployment, overcrowding, and lack of basic services. The shelters are old and dilapidated, and they fail to protect residents from rain during the rainy season. Sanitation conditions are also critical, as the toilets are full and lack proper drainage.

Compared to the initial year of displacement, charitable organizations are now providing limited attention and assistance to the IDPs' needs. The presence of active war between Fano militants and the government forces could contribute for it. Recently, Agmas Ethiopia, a local charity organization, launched a three-day online fundraising campaign in coordination with social media influencers (Agmas Ethiopia, 2026). This initiative aimed to address the most urgent humanitarian needs of the displaced population. Although IDPs current displacement camp is located in a conflict zone, FGD discussants noted that they don not feel threatened due to their shared ethnic background with the local Amhara community. One female interviewee explained, "Although we feel dependent on the local community, we are sleeping very well. We are not afraid for our security here."

Discussions with IDPs on the Return Plan

Prior to the actual implementation of the return program, several discussions were held between IDPs, the Return Committee, and government representatives from the Amhara and Oromia Regions. The government invited all IDPs to participate in meetings that took place

at Dagmawi Menelik Hall, Haile Mariam Mamo Primary School, and later at China Camp. All these places are located in Debre Birhan.

Although IDPs viewed return as a potentially sustainable solution to their displacement, they expressed concerns regarding the timing of the return. They strongly urged the government to clear the area from Shene armed forces than implementing the return rashly. During these discussions, IDPs raised a number of critical issues with government officials. These included, security issues, property-related concerns and political questions that are directly linked to the lives and safety of possible returnees in their places of origin. The following section provides an overview of the issues raised in the discussion.

Security Questions

According to the IASC Framework, returnees must feel secure both emotionally and physically, which requires addressing the underlying issues that originally caused their displacement. They should be protected from violence, harassment, and attacks upon arrival. The return process must be implemented in a manner that ensures IDPs' freedom of movement, equal to that of local residents. Overall, the return must address the safety concerns of IDPs and enhance their overall level of security.

Many IDPs expressed deep concerns about the security situation in their original villages, viewing it as a major obstacle to return. They reported receiving frequent updates from relatives and neighbours who remained in those areas, describing worsening insecurity. One IDP noted, "In our phone conversation with locals, we often heard that the Shene forces are waiting to start an attack until all displaced person returns from Debre Birhan." A woman interviewee explained, "We love our original land. For me, that place was everything. We could produce our crops there. Our land is now without seed; however, it is occupied by Shene forces. It is better to return when Shene is cleared." IDPs requested the government, through the intermediaries of religious leaders to cancel the planned return citing security concerns as the primary reason. As one group of female discussants explained:

During our displacement, some Amhara IDPs who had fled from Oromia were staying in nearby woreda towns. We asked the government to first return those IDPs to assess the security situation. They have not yet gone back to their villages. Despite this reality, the government pressured us to return. (Women FGD discussants, China Camp, August 2024)

The fears of IDPs were largely disregarded by government officials. Participants reported that those who resisted return were often intimidated or even threatened with arrest. Those who were not interested to return faced to leave the camp and lost their IDP status. While undertaking this interview and FGD, the data collector observed new IDPs from West Shewa zone of Oromia waiting to register in Woyneshet Camp.

Economic Concerns

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement include provisions to prevent the destruction of properties left behind during displacement. If property has already been looted, the principles mandate that the government provide appropriate compensation during the implementation of durable solutions. Principle 29(2) states:



Competent authorities have the duty and responsibility to assist returned and/or resettled internally displaced persons to recover, to the extent possible, their property and possessions which they left behind or were dispossessed of upon their displacement. When recovery of such property and possessions is not possible, competent authorities shall provide or assist these persons in obtaining appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation.

In addition to the UN Guiding Principles, the IASC Framework also promotes access to livelihoods and employment for IDPs following the implementation of any durable solution. Similarly, Article XII of the Kampala Convention imposes a duty on states to provide appropriate compensation for the lost property of IDPs.

Another key concern raised by IDPs was related to compensation for properties destroyed or lost during the conflict, as well as reparations for the deaths of immediate family members. Many IDPs reported that their cattle had been confiscated by armed groups and local youth. One female interviewee stated *"Personally, I had ten cattle. I left them in the field because my priority at the time was to save my life. I do not know who took them."* This is the common story of many of the research participants. Most of their houses and agricultural produce were burnt during the conflict. The cattle and other movable properties were confiscated.

An interviewee from Sibu Sire Woreda in Wollega added that their property, including tin roofing had been taken by local special forces. Some people also became physically disabled during the conflict.

According to interviewees, government representatives promised to address these concerns only after the return had been completed. They pledged to provide each household with one year of emergency food supplies, agricultural equipment, support for reconstructing burnt houses, and free fertilizer, seeds, and oxen for farming. However, IDPs were explicitly told not to request compensation for lost cattle or stolen property during or after the conflict. One male interviewee described the government's response regarding property compensation:

Government representatives told us not to raise complaints even if we see our stolen cattle in someone's hands. As you know, our house was completely burnt. Asking retrospective justice was not allowed. The past is already gone; the return only looks toward the future. (Male interviewee, China Camp, August 2024)

Political Questions

According to interviewees, IDPs raised several political concerns focused on the need for greater autonomy in cultural and political affairs through their legitimate representatives, as well as the desire to avoid discrimination in local administration. They believe that Shene is supported by local government apparatus. One interviewee from Bako Tebe Woreda stated "Members of Shene who have been found guilty of displacement or killings are not sent to jail. Instead, the local government is focusing on disarming ethnic Amhara farmers. This has left us exposed to attacks without any means of self-defence."

IDPs invoked their constitutional rights under Article 39(2) of the FDRE Constitution, which affirms that: "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history." One male interviewee elaborated on these demands as follows:

We asked government officials to allow our children to learn in the Amharic language, to use Amharic in courts, to establish special Amhara zones and woredas in the Oromia region, to respect our Amhara identity, and to have our own representatives at kebele, woreda, zonal, and federal levels. (Male interviewee who refused to return, China Camp, August 2024)

Similar administrative arrangement exists in the Amhara region, where an Oromo Special Zone has been established for ethnic Oromos. Such political structures enable communities to establish trusted local security mechanisms, including militias, which residents believe can protect them from potential attacks.

The Experiences of IDPs in the Return Program

During the initial meetings with IDPs, government representatives were aware that most participants were unwilling to return due to persistent insecurity in their areas of origin. In response, the government adopted a revised approach to implement the return plan. IDPs were divided into groups based on their original woredas, and officials began engaging with them individually in an effort to persuade them to return, despite continued objections. One female interviewee explained:

“The camp coordinators told us to return to Oromia. They warned us to dismantle the shelters and said food assistance would be stopped in the camp. I returned to fulfil the government’s interest.”

Subsequently, the government ordered all IDPs to register their agricultural land and urban houses located in their areas of origin. IDPs reported that they were not informed of the purpose of this registration. In the days that followed, those who complied were identified and listed as first-round returnees. Participants described this process as coercive. As one focus group discussant explained:

Camp coordinators warned us that refusing to return would lead the government to confiscate our agricultural land and urban houses. They also threatened to cut off aid and expel us from the camp. Some people were even searched by police for not cooperating with the government’s persuasion efforts. We begged officials, through religious leaders and elders, to halt the return project because we had reliable information about the insecurity of the area. (Male FGD discussants, China Camp, August 2024)

Land is a vital resource for farmers and pastoralists whose livelihoods are intrinsically dependent on access to land. In recognition of this, Guiding Principle 9 of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement emphasizes the obligation of national governments to prevent displacement of populations whose survival is closely linked to land, including farmers and pastoralists. Furthermore, the government’s return decision appears to contravene Guiding Principle 15(d), which prohibits the return or resettlement of IDPs to areas where their physical or mental safety would be at risk.

In addition, the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons identifies peace or the existence of peace agreements as a key enabling condition for pursuing durable solutions including return. In the absence of sustained security and safety guarantees, the implementation of return initiatives risks undermining these international standards.



The government arranged three round return schedules. Reactions among IDPs to the government-led return plan were mixed. Some IDPs accepted the return in the hope that conditions would eventually improve, while others rejected the call and decided to take risks including leaving the camp and losing access to aid. IDPs' decisions were influenced by physical ability, household size, household income, and land ownership.

For instance, physically able individuals were less likely to accept the return. Instead, they preferred to work as daily labourers in areas where peace was available. In contrast, elderly and pregnant individuals, as well as those with large household sizes who depended on government aid, were more likely to accept the return.

As the return process was closely linked to land possession, elders were among the first-round returnees, compelled to return primarily to prevent the confiscation of their farmland and urban houses. Individuals with larger landholdings often accepted the return in order to save their land from confiscation by the government. Many acknowledged that they were fully aware of the insecurity in their areas of origin but felt they had no viable alternative if they wished to save their property. This practice runs counter to the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions, which requires governments to refrain from implementing voluntary durable solutions when there is a reasonable belief that such solutions pose risks to the lives or safety of returnees.

Several returnees also cited government promises as a key motivation for participating in the return program. One male interviewee from Bako Tibe woreda recalled:

Government officials promised to provide one year's food supply in advance, free fertilizer, seeds, and oxen to start farming immediately after return. They also pledged to help us reconstruct our private homes. We were eager to become self-reliant through crop production. (Male interviewee who rejoined China Camp after three months of return, August 2024)

In other words, decisions to return were driven by economic dependency and physical vulnerability. Elderly individuals and female-headed households who relied entirely on government assistance feared the withdrawal of aid if they refused to return. As one female returnee explained "I am physically weak and cannot engage in labour work. I worried about the fate of my four children if the aid was cut off. That was the only reason I decided to return." Such returns appear to violate Guiding Principle 4(2) of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which states that:

Certain internally displaced persons, such as children, especially unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities and elderly persons, shall be entitled to the protection and assistance required by their condition and to treatment which takes into account their special needs.

During this process, IDPs who presented valid medical evidence and students enrolled in local schools were allowed to return in the latter return phases.

Journey to Homeland

After spending up to four years in displacement camps and becoming detached from their places of origin, the return journey of IDPs was marked by mixed emotions of fear and hope.

For many, return was both an adventurous and deeply traumatic undertaking, as it meant going back to places associated with the death of family members, severe trauma, destruction of property, and identity-based killings. At the same time, return also symbolized hope, faith, and the aspiration for self-reliance, as IDPs sought to free themselves from the dependency and uncertainty of camp life.

The federal government organized free public buses to transport IDPs and their belongings, with convoys escorted by members of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces to ensure security along the routes. This protection was considered necessary due to threats from armed groups known to kidnap travellers and demand ransom payments. The journey of the first-round returnees reportedly proceeded without major incidents, and upon arrival they received a warm reception from local government officials and *Abba Gadaa* community leaders. However, subsequent rounds of return were marked by significant challenges, including unnecessary delays and harsh travel conditions. Many second- and third-round returnees described prolonged journeys, in some cases spending the night inside buses without access to food, water, or blankets. One male interviewee recounted:

During our journey, we were stopped for three hours without knowing the reason as we were about to enter Addis Ababa. Our children were crying because they were hungry. Although water was available, there was no food service until we reached Ginchi town. IDPs returning to Sibu Sire, Dano, and Boneya Bushe woredas spent the night on the bus without blankets and food. Those returning to Bako Tibe woreda received half *injera*, a staple food in Ethiopia, each from the first-round returnees who waited us in woreda town. (Male interviewee who returned to Bako Tibe woreda in the third round but later rejoined China Camp, August 2024)

In addition, multiple security checkpoints were established along the routes in the Oromia region, as local officials suspected that some returnees might have links with Fano forces operating in the Amhara region. This heightened scrutiny made many returnees feel unwelcome and mistrusted by local authorities, negatively shaping their perceptions of return to their original villages.

Upon arrival in their respective woreda towns, no immediate food or humanitarian assistance was provided. Instead, ethnic Amharas who had remained in displacement camps shared portions of their limited food supplies with the returnees until government support eventually became available.

According to interviewees, the implementation of the return plan was characterized by a lack of coordination and consistency. While some woreda administrations actively encouraged return, others expressed reluctance due to persistent insecurity. For example, Bako Tibe and Wayu Tuka woredas reportedly prepared to receive returnees, whereas Sibu Sire woreda declined to do so due to instability in the area. This fragmented approach runs contrary to the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions, which emphasizes cooperation among local, national, humanitarian, and development actors (Brookings Institution, 2010). The framework further obliges governments at all levels to facilitate the presence of non-governmental humanitarian and donor agencies, enabling them both to deliver assistance and to independently monitor return processes (IASC, 2010).



The life of IDPs Up on return

Those who accepted return for various reasons were settled in woreda towns rather than in their original villages due to persistent insecurity in rural areas. As a result, many returnees were accommodated in temporary camps within woreda towns and were unable to access their homes or farmland. The perception that the government will keep all the promises and their ambition to produce crops was not realized due to insecurity. They have been told to stay patiently for three months until the security improved. Humanitarian organizations faced significant access constraints because of the deteriorating security situation. Government support was limited to the distribution of 15 kilograms of wheat flour per individual for a month. There was no discussion platform between returnees and local government.

First-round returnees strongly discouraged subsequent rounds from returning, sharing their experiences of insecurity and hardship. Returned IDPs consistently reported that they did not feel safe in their areas of return. One male FGD discussant described the situation as follows:

I was born in Gobo Seyo woreda in East Wollega, and I am now forty years old. The woreda assigned ethnically mixed militias from Oromo and Amhara to protect us. But the Shene forces came and killed four people

Authorities restricted the freedom of movement of returnees, warning them not to leave woreda towns due to security risks. Although some returnees expressed a desire to return back to Debe Birhan and other area, many were unable to do so because they could not afford transportation costs.

In certain areas, such as Wayu Tuka woreda, local administrations reportedly permitted IDPs to carry arms to protect themselves from Shene attacks. However, many IDPs viewed this measure negatively, as they suspected collusion or negligence by local authorities in previous attacks. This further undermined trust and increased fear of renewed targeting.

Government promises to enable farmers to plough and plant crops upon return were largely unfulfilled. The gap between official commitments and lived realities exposed returnees to stress and psychological harm. Rather than resuming agricultural production, security conditions continued to deteriorate. Some IDPs who attempted to cultivate their land on their own initiative were forced to flee again due to escalating violence, resulting in secondary displacement. One male discussant explained:

The government promised to return every displaced person to their home, but now more than six months have passed and nothing has been provided. People are living under very hard conditions. There is gunfire almost every night. There is no freedom of movement because of insecurity. The woreda does not take responsibility if IDPs go far outside the town. Shene forces surround us. The local government perceive that returnees from Debre Birhan received military training from the Amhara Fano group.

In some woredas, the concentration of IDPs in camps reportedly attracted increased attention from Shene forces, further heightening insecurity. In response, the government instructed IDPs to disperse and independently secure rental housing. This shift placed a disproportionate burden on economically vulnerable households, particularly large families and female-headed households. One female interviewee recounted “My woreda is Gubo Seyo. We were settled

in a camp in the woreda town, but the next day the government told us to find rental housing. I and my four children were left on the street because we had no money.”

Returnees also reported feelings of isolation, as some of their family members refused to return. In many cases, elderly family members returned in order to reclaim or protect their land, while their children who did not possess land remained in the Amhara region and relied on daily wage labour for survival. This family separation deepened emotional distress and weakened traditional support systems. One adult male interviewee explained “I refused to return, but my father accepted the return. One day I received a call that my father was sick. I could not go back to help him because the road is not safe without escort from the National Defense Force.”

Re-displacement after return

As emphasized in the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions, achieving durable solutions in post-conflict settings is closely linked to local and national political stability. IDPs are expected to play a central role in community dialogue, peace negotiations, and broader peacebuilding processes. Peace agreements should address not only the cessation of violence but also reconciliation, healing of past trauma, resolution of property-related disputes, mitigation of future fears, trust-building, and the promotion of social cohesion. Furthermore, Article VII(4) of the Kampala Convention mandates that perpetrators of displacement, including armed groups, be held accountable before courts of law.

Although no official statistics document the exact number of returnees who were re-displaced after return, research participants estimated that more than half of the returnees eventually re-displaced after participating in the return. According to interviewees, re-displacement was driven by persistent insecurity, lack of follow-up by authorities, insufficient assistance, anti-return narratives, and a wide gap between expectations created by government promises and the realities on the ground. One women focus group discussant described the situation as follows:

People who returned did not feel comfortable. They faced hunger, insecurity, and another round of killings. They had no money to come back, so some returned on foot, while those who had money came by bus. Those who are physically and economically incapable are left there, waiting for death.

The re-displacement was instigated by IDPs who felt unwelcomed by the local administration and after observing the insecurity of the area. There was bullet sound in the area that signify the trainings shene armed forces. There were people who think to re-displace after a week. Returnees who were capable to cover transportation and travel-related expenses returned to China Camp. There were also returnees moved to relatively peaceful regions such as Sidama and the South Regional State in search of employment. In contrast, those who remained in the return camps were predominantly elderly individuals or economically constrained returnees who lacked the capacity to relocate again. Some returnees managed to return to China Camp only by appealing to vehicle drivers for free transportation or by undertaking risky journeys. One female returnee explained:

Returning to China Camp requires individual decision, courage, and risk-taking, since you may face kidnapping by armed groups during the journey. It took more than a day to reach the Amhara region. You also have to pay 1,400 ETB for the



travel ticket, not including other personal expenses.(Female returnee who rejoined China Camp after a week, August 2024)

Consequences of Refuse to Return

IDPs who refused to accept the government's return plan were no longer officially recognized as internally displaced persons and were excluded from assistance provided by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. This exclusion followed directives from senior government authorities instructing camp coordinators to discontinue shelter, food aid, and other services for IDPs who declined return or who rejoined the camps after an unsuccessful return. In practice, however, camp coordinators continued to allow both refuse and re-displaced IDPs to remain in shelters without aid. In addition, IDPs reported being threatened with the loss of their agricultural land and houses located in their areas of origin, although these threats had not been formally implemented at the time of this study.

As the majority of IDPs were illiterate and lacked formal employment opportunities, many were pushed into exploitative and labour-intensive work to meet their basic needs and support their families. One female interviewee who refused to return explained "I engage in daily labour work from morning to evening. It is especially hard for single mothers to raise children alone, but I keep working because there is no one else to care for them."

Vulnerable groups, including elderly persons, persons with disabilities, and pregnant women, were increasingly forced into begging to earn income. Others became economically dependent on relatively better-off relatives, further deepening their vulnerability and undermining their dignity.

Conclusion

The Government of Ethiopia has promoted return as the preferred durable solution to address conflict-induced displacement of Amhara IDPs. IDPs themselves expressed a willingness to return as far as their safety and security is guaranteed. This finding contrast with studies conducted in Guji–Gedeo conflict that IDPs preferred local integration with host communities who share similar ethnic identity.

Decisions regarding return were shaped by multiple push and pull factors with security land ownership emerging as a critical determinant. Landless IDPs who relied primarily on wage labor tended to refuse return, whereas landowners opted to return despite awareness of the security risks. This pattern aligns with Bradley's findings, which suggest that landless IDPs are more likely to adapt to resettlement elsewhere rather than return to their areas of origin. Nevertheless, the coercive practices observed during the return process directly contradict with UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which emphasize that return must be voluntary, safe, and dignified.

The finding further implies returns implemented without adequate preparation and particularly without security guarantee are likely to result in secondary displacement. Such poorly planned returns further jeopardized the safety and well-being of returnees, particularly vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities, elderly individuals, women, and children. Elderly returnees, in particular, faced physical exhaustion, psychological distress, and age-related health complications. These conditions contravene the 2005 directive of the UN

Commission on Human Rights, which mandates special protection measures for vulnerable populations.

The return process was further inconsistent with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and other legal frameworks ratified by the Ethiopian government. UN Principle 15 and 28 emphasize that returns must be voluntary, safe, and dignified, and must not expose IDPs to additional risks. Coercive measures documented during the study including threats to confiscate property, suspension of aid, and inadequate security provision constitute clear violations of these principles. Such non-compliance undermines both the legitimacy of the return program and the ability of IDPs to make informed, voluntary decisions regarding their return.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that the government to prioritize addressing underlying security challenges and refrain from policies that exacerbate ethnic polarization. As highlighted in the IOM (2022) report, the majority of internal displacement in Ethiopia are conflict-driven. Therefore, meaningful dialogue among conflicting parties is essential. Once sustainable peace is restored in areas of origin, IDPs can pursue voluntary and safe return in accordance with international standards. Finally, the study recommends that future researches to incorporate the experiences of returnees currently residing in Oromia region to capture the full spectrum of post-return outcomes.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares no possible of conflict of interests regarding authorship or publication.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available to keep participants name, identity and village unknown. However, are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration of Originality

The manuscript has not been published before and not being considered for publication elsewhere in its final form either in printed or electronic form.

Consent of Human Participants

Data were collected from interviewees and focus group discussion (FGD) participants after obtaining informed consent. The data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee, which reviewed the strategies developed to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality. The ethics approval document will be attached at later stage of this publication.

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