



**OMNA
TIGRAY**

SITUATION REPORT

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HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The Civil War in Tigray has led to the killings of thousands of civilians.

On November 4, 2020, unelected Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed enacted a “law-and-order operation” against the elected Tigray regional government. This quickly escalated into a regional war with the involvement of foreign actors.

Since the war began, Tigrayans have endured population displacement, starvation, healthcare emergencies, lack of access to essential services and needs, and other war crimes. Reportedly more than 50,000 civilians have died, over 60,000 Tigrayans have fled into Sudan, over 500,000 Tigrayans are internally displaced, and 4.5 million Tigrayans are at risk of starvation. There have also been countless reports of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Further, the war on Tigray has crippled the region’s healthcare infrastructure, affecting over 6 million people. Over 80 percent of hospitals in Tigray are defunct because they have been looted, bombed, or now lack medical staff, and most life-saving medicines are not available.

Aid agencies are unable to reach 80 percent of Tigray’s population. Internet services have been consistently down and telephone services mostly cut off, with sporadic connectivity across Tigray. The Ethiopian government has largely restricted local and international media agencies from entering Tigray. The Ethiopian government suspended the licenses of BBC and Reuters, two of the largest international media organizations soon after the war began. As of the end of February 2021, representatives from seven international media outlets were allowed into Tigray’s capital Mekelle, though their access to civilians was limited, and many of their translators have since been detained.

The Eritrean government is heavily involved in carrying out mass indiscriminate killing of civilians, SGBV, looting, and destroying infrastructure and UNESCO heritage sites. The European Union has joined the United States in calling for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops, which are fueling the conflict in Tigray, committing atrocities and exacerbating ethnic violence, from Ethiopia.

Eritrea continues to deny involvement in the war on Tigray amid mounting evidence, and PM Abiy has opposed any international mediation efforts.



On November 4, 2020, unelected PM Abiy claimed that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) located in Tigray. Abiy launched a "law-and-order operation" that was supposed to last 3 to 5 days. The TPLF claims the strike was carried out in "self-defense." Political analysts and diplomats in the region have confirmed that there were evident signs of preparations to attack the TPLF prior to November 2020 and to the alleged attack on the Northern Command. An Ethiopian general was also recorded admitting that they were preparing for war before the alleged attack by the TPLF in November.

There has also been increasing evidence that the war on Tigray was being planned since Ethiopia normalized relations with Eritrea in 2018. The TPLF was a common adversary of Abiy and Eritrean dictator Isaias Afwerki. Abiy viewed the TPLF as a challenge to his plans to consolidate and centralize power and dismantle Ethiopia's federal system by dissolving the party that brought him to power - the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In December 2019, Abiy formed the Prosperity Party (PP). Tigray's regional government questioned the constitutionality of the party, and Abiy saw this as a threat to his authority. For Dictator Isaias, his feud with the TPLF is deeply personal. It is a story of grievances, bad blood, and ideological disputes that stretches back to the 1970s when Eritrea was fighting for independence from Ethiopia and continues through the 1998 border war with Ethiopia.

Prior to officially waging war on Tigray, Abiy had taken steps to weaken Tigray. He allowed road blockades restricting access to Tigray, reduced Tigray's budget, and hindered the fight against locust infestation. Moreover, between 2018 and 2020, there were a series of assassinations of prominent political figures, which fueled the growing instability and rising ethnic tensions in Ethiopia. All of the assassinations had two common factors: 1) the victims privately and publicly criticized PM Abiy Ahmed and 2) results of the investigations into their deaths yielded unclear results as to who the perpetrators were.



As tensions rose between the TPLF and Abiy's Prosperity Party, the TPLF decided to hold regional elections in September 2020. During a speech to parliament, Abiy publicly warned that the repercussions of holding elections would involve "mothers crying, youth dying, and buildings falling." Abiy called the elections unconstitutional and TPLF illegitimate, eventually labeling them as terrorists. In response, Abiy withheld social welfare funds, refused to release a budget, and confiscated locust-fighting machinery during the worst locust-outbreak in decades.

Two weeks after waging the war on Tigray, on November 21, 2020, the Ethiopian military warned civilians that there would be "no mercy" if residents of Mekelle did not "save themselves" during a final offensive to capture the capital city. There is evidence that United Arab Emirates (UAE) drones have been deployed by Ethiopia, from a military base in Eritrea. Both governments have denied it. That said, a video of an ENDF general admitting to the utilization of UAE drones in Tigray was leaked. Omna Tigray has access to photos leaked from Ayder hospital of victims from the aerial bombardments that ensued. Omna Tigray also has access to a translated version of the video clip.

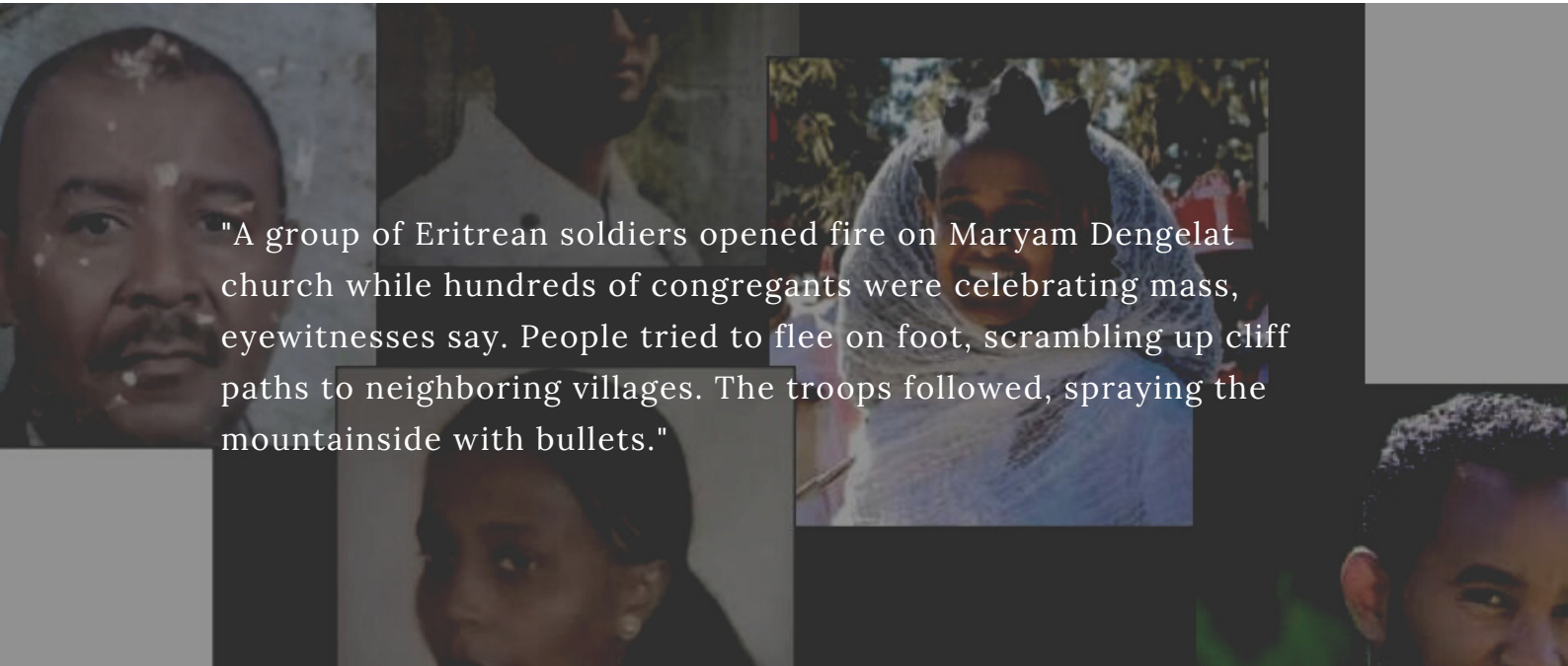
The Ethiopian government seized Mekelle on November 28, 2020. Soon after capturing Mekelle, Abiy claimed that the Ethiopian government had "completed and ceased the military operations." He also claimed that it was a swift, bloodless campaign. However, both claims have been far from reality. Although Ethiopian federal forces seized control of Tigray's main towns, sporadic and intense fighting between Ethiopian forces and the TPLF has continued across Tigray.



The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have repeatedly denied claims of Eritrean forces' involvement in the war; however, there is mounting evidence to the contrary. The United States has demanded for the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces. In February 2021, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for the withdrawal of Eritrean and Ethiopian regional forces from Tigray and for an end to killings and human rights violations there.

Eritrean soldiers are reported to have looted markets, residences, aid supplies, universities, hospitals, and stolen vehicles, including ambulances. They have destroyed historical and religious places of worship and set fire to crops. There have also been reports of mass killings, SGBV, and torture. These accounts are supported by pictures, videos, and stories coming out of Tigray's capital city of Mekelle where some communication has been restored. There are also reports of people fleeing to the mountains or to Sudan to escape atrocities being committed by the Eritrean military.

The Eritrean government has also been targeting Ethiopian politicians who have spoken out against the involvement of Eritrea in Tigray. Lidetu Ayalew, a prominent Ethiopian politician, has said that he was warned by an Ethiopian government official that Eritrean Dictator Isaias would kill him if he continued to voice criticism over Eritrea's role in Ethiopia.



"A group of Eritrean soldiers opened fire on Maryam Dengelat church while hundreds of congregants were celebrating mass, eyewitnesses say. People tried to flee on foot, scrambling up cliff paths to neighboring villages. The troops followed, spraying the mountainside with bullets."

There are reports of widespread massacres committed by ENDF, Amhara militias (i.e. Fano), Eritrean Forces, and Amhara Special Forces in Mai-Kadra, Zalambessa, Edaga Hamus, Axum, Adigrat, Adwa, Humera, Adi Irob, Shire and their surrounding areas. There have been uncontested acts of genocide inside Tigray, as actors such as Amhara militias and Eritrean soldiers, explicitly stated their purpose in the war was to exterminate Tigrayans. There is video evidence that corroborates this that is translated and captioned. Refugees that escaped into Sudan also reported being ethnically targeted during massacres as soldiers would repeatedly claim their intention was to exterminate Tigrayans as an act of revenge. Additionally, there have been reports of pre-genocidal acts and policies perpetrated by government officials against ethnic Tigrayans in Addis Ababa. More than 40,000 Tigrayans have reportedly been detained just in the capital. According to a senior diplomat in Canada, there are internment camps throughout the country where young Tigrayan men are taken and held. Reports of these internment camps have been circulating in Ethiopian media since early 2019.

Ethnic Tigrayan members of the ENDF, including those part of UN mandated peacekeeping missions, Tigrayan Federal police officers, federal employees and diplomats are being fired because of their Tigrayan ethnicity. Photos of forms required by certain employers, which included indicating Tigrayan ethnicity, were leaked. There have been thousands of incidents of ethnic profiling and ethnic-fueled hate crimes against Tigrayans. Omna Tigray has been collaborating with the Global Society of Tigrayan Scholars association that is compiling a list of all of these incidents.

SILENCING TIGRAYAN VOICES

The Ethiopian government is working tirelessly to silence Tigrayans who are exposing the atrocities being committed in Tigray. Tigrayans are being tortured and abused in connection with their interaction with journalists. There are also disturbing reports coming from Mekelle that English translators for the seven media outlets currently in Tigray have been kidnapped, tortured, and abused.

Tigrayan journalists who have reported on the atrocities being committed in Tigray have also been targeted and arrested in Addis Ababa.

Ethiopian forces assassinated a prominent Tigrayan regional state television journalist, Dawit Kebede Araya, in January 2021. Sources in Ethiopia who were close to him disclosed to Omna Tigray that members of the Prosperity Party asked him to formally become a member and he refused a week before he was assassinated.

On February 26, 2021, Amnesty International released a report regarding the Axum Massacre that occurred between November 19 and 29, 2020. It details the following:

“Eritrean troops operating in the Ethiopian city of Axum, Tigray, committed a series of human rights and humanitarian law violations, including killing hundreds of civilians. In this briefing, Amnesty International documents how the Eritrean military is responsible for serious violations against Tigrayan civilians in Axum. It concludes that the indiscriminate shelling of Axum by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops may amount to war crimes and that the mass execution of Axum civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity.”

The report also includes satellite imagery analysis conducted by Amnesty’s Crisis Evidence Lab which corroborates reports of indiscriminate shelling and mass looting and points out signs of new mass burial sites near two of the city’s churches.

Following this report, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted on February 27, 2021:

“The United States is gravely concerned by reports of atrocities in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. We strongly condemn the killings, forced removals, sexual violence, and other violations of human rights. The international community must work together to prevent further atrocities.” - @SecBlinken

This tweet reflects a full statement published by the U.S. government regarding atrocities in Tigray. The report, published on the same day, expresses serious concern over the humanitarian crisis in Tigray:

“The immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces and Amhara regional forces from Tigray are essential first steps. They should be accompanied by unilateral declarations of cessation of hostilities by all parties to the conflict and a commitment to permit unhindered delivery of assistance to those in Tigray. The United States is committed to working with the international community to achieve these goals. To that end, USAID will deploy a Disaster Assistance Response Team to Ethiopia to continue delivering life-saving assistance.

We ask international partners, especially the African Union and regional partners, to work with us to address the crisis in Tigray, including through action at the UN and other relevant bodies.”

Several reputable news sources, such as the Associated Press and the New York Times, have published articles confirming Amnesty's report.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes responded to the Amnesty Axum report by relying on what seems to be a coordinated but carefully crafted cover-up strategy. The Eritrean regime outrightly rejected Amnesty's report as a lie and as an act of blackmail to the state and accused Amnesty of not consulting them. This is consistent with their persistent denial of involvement in the conflict and their behavior of outright denial of forced disappearances, killings, repression of political and religious freedom within Eritrea for the last 30 years.

The Ethiopian regime for its part dedicated a lengthy and irresponsible statement to cover up the atrocities committed in Axum. The press statement begins with the usual but strongly contested assignment of blame to the Tigrayan authorities who attacked the Northern Command and who are thus 'primarily responsible' for whatever has occurred since. The Ethiopian government has been using the Northern Command Base attack narrative as a license to massacre civilians, rape women, and loot and destroy the livelihoods of millions of Tigrayans.

HEALTHCARE EMERGENCIES

The war on Tigray has caused a massive healthcare emergency affecting over 6 million people. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that it took several attempts to enter Tigray. In Mekelle, there were no basic supplies, and the local hospital was running at 30 to 40 percent, with very little medication. Most of the health staff had left, there was hardly any medicine and there was no food, water, or money. On December 27, 2020, MSF reported that the towns of Adwa and Axum had no running water or electricity. In addition to the hospitals, around 80 to 90 percent of the health centers visited by MSF between Mekelle and Axum were not functional, either due to a lack of staff or because they were looted. Rural areas in Tigray are virtually unreachable by aid agencies and are expected to be faring much worse.

In February 2021, MSF reported that over 80 percent of hospitals in Tigray are defunct because they have been looted, bombed, or now lack medical staff. Millions of people without life-saving medication are either dying at home or traveling for days on foot to reach Mekelle where there is a functioning hospital. The decimation of the healthcare infrastructure has forced pregnant women to deliver their babies in hazardous environments and many others have died from preventable diseases. With limited medical resources and space, the risk of a cholera and/or COVID-19 outbreak is considerably high in cities across Tigray.

Families of SGBV victims, international aid/medical workers in Tigray, Tigrayan medical workers, doctors in refugee camps in Sudan, and Ethiopian military officials have confirmed the increasing number of SGBV victims in Tigray. Reports of these allegations from Tigray are coming from the capital city of Mekelle, where some telecommunication has been restored.

Hospitals and aid agencies operating out of Tigray estimate thousands of women have been raped by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers.

Doctors in Sudan treating Tigrayan refugee women have recounted harrowing stories from survivors of SGBV. Hundreds of women who fled to refugee camps in Sudan when the conflict broke out have reported being raped by invading forces prior to fleeing their hometowns or on their way to refugee camps in Sudan.

Most of these women have said they were forced to choose between rape or death. Others were raped in exchange for basic commodities, such as water and food. A 25-year-old woman who was given a harrowing choice between rape or life by a soldier ended up being raped with a gun held to her head. International and national aid workers have told of receiving similar reports of abuse in Tigray. In Shire, Tigray, Eritrean soldiers raped and killed a 20-year old autistic woman, killed her 14-year-old sister, and raped their 60-year-old mother. When the mother asked them to kill her too, they responded: “no, we want you to cry.”

Military officers and appointed interim officials to Tigray have acknowledged the issue on national TV. On January 9, 2021, Ethiopian national TV showed a military officer admitting to rape allegations in Mekelle, after the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers took control. He went on to say that rape is expected to occur in conflict. Ethiopia’s Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth was “investigating” SGBV allegations until recently. The Ministry recently admitted to rape allegations in Tigray.

In January 2021, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms. Pramila Patten said that she was “greatly concerned by serious allegations including ‘a high number of alleged rapes’ in the Tigrayan capital Mekelle. There are also disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence. Some women also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities.”

During the first Ethiopian Civil War in the 1980s, the Derg regime weaponized food and humanitarian aid and denied doing so when the international community confronted the regime. As a result, 1.2 million died of starvation, and they were predominantly from Tigray. This was the methodology used to drain resources from the TPLF, and the same tactics are being employed now. As per a senior Derg official, “to kill the fish, you drain the water.”

Four months into the war, there are confirmed reports of Tigrayans, both individuals and families, dying from starvation. We expect at least hundreds of Tigrayans to have died from starvation in Adi Irob, Adwa, and Adigrat. The Economist recently wrote that “Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon” as the Tigray region is “being starved into submission.”

Eritrean forces looted markets, small shops, and residences in the past two months. Eritrean forces and Amhara militia also burnt crops that were ready for harvest. Satellite images have confirmed the destruction of crops and of the UN World Food Programme compound at one refugee camp.

The historic locust infestation in 2020 and COVID-19 had already challenged food security in the region when this war began and the war has further worsened food security in Tigray. The Ethiopian Red Cross warned earlier in February 2021 that without improved humanitarian access to a region where 80 percent of the population of six million is still unreachable, tens of thousands could starve to death after two months. Over 4.5 million Tigrayans are at risk of starvation. Over 2 million children remain cut off from necessary emergency humanitarian assistance. UNICEF has dispatched 655 metric tons of emergency supplies but the majority of Tigrayans living in rural areas are still inaccessible.



The situation in Tigray is dire. It has the potential to be one of the most catastrophic humanitarian disasters in modern history. It requires immediate attention and action from the international community, specifically in taking action and condemning the actions of war criminals. This also involves refuting the disinformation propaganda undermining the current reality on the ground. International organizations and governments are now beginning to echo the harrowing details mentioned in this report as well as previous papers published by Omna Tigray.

Omna Tigray has detailed documents that further provide explanations, nuances, and sources of information related to the conflict and humanitarian crisis on several of its social media platforms and website.

Omna Tigray

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