



**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. Soon after the declaration, it became clear this was a regional war with the involvement of foreign actors. Abiy has opposed international mediation efforts.

It has been five months since the war began. Over the course of these five months, Tigrayans have endured population displacement, starvation, healthcare emergencies, lack of access to essential services and needs, and other war crimes. More than 70,000 civilians have reportedly died, though this number was released by several Tigrayan political opposition groups in early February 2021, and no new estimate has been released despite reports of continued massacres. Over 75,000 Tigrayans have fled into Sudan, over 2.2 million 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 and militias. Those who are able to report their stories of SGBV do so at a risk to their safety. At the end of March 2021, reports emerged that soldiers went to the only One-Stop-Center in Mekelle and intimidated the survivors. Further, the war on Tigray has crippled the region’s healthcare infrastructure, affecting over 6 million people. Over 80 percent of health facilities 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 have only been able to reach 16 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. In February and March 2021, representatives from some international media outlets were allowed into Tigray’s capital, Mekelle, though their access to civilians was limited.

The stories from these international media outlets has shown the severity of the atrocities being committed in Tigray.

The Eritrean government is heavily involved in carrying out mass indiscriminate killing of civilians, sexual and gender-based violence, 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. On March 23, 2021, in response to mounting international pressure, Abiy acknowledged the presence of Eritrean troops and the potential atrocities they committed, and stated that “Eritrea will withdraw troops from Ethiopia.” That said, diaspora who were able to reach their families in Tigray in late March were told that more Eritrean forces have entered the northern parts of Adigrat, Tigray.





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 prior 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.



Since the beginning of the conflict, the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments had repeatedly denied claims of Eritrean forces' involvement in the war, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. In light of the credible evidence, 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.

Ethiopia's denial of Eritrea's involvement in Tigray ended during a meeting with the Ethiopian parliament on March 23, 2021. He finally admitted to the presence of Eritrean soldiers in Tigray and acknowledged that "reports indicate that atrocities have been committed in Tigray region." Despite his acknowledgment, he claims that Ethiopia was not involved in Eritrea's decision to enter Tigray and that there is some "propaganda exaggeration" as far as the atrocities being reported.

These atrocities, which Abiy refers to, are reports that Eritrean soldiers 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.



"In November, as she was fleeing,' Freweyni said, 'a group of Ethiopian soldiers stopped her and asked the gender of the child in her arms. Only because the child was a girl did they let her go. Boys were being taken away from others fleeing,' she said."

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.

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.

In that same March 23 meeting, Abiy also stated that Eritrean troops are to withdraw from Ethiopia and that Ethiopia won't accept damage caused to its people, amid growing pressure from the international community. However, reports from diaspora family members in northern Tigray suggest that Eritrean troops are not only still in Tigray, but growing in number in some locations, including Adigrat.

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 were also disturbing reports coming from Mekelle that English translators for the seven media outlets currently in Tigray were kidnapped, tortured and abused. Most have reportedly been released since in response to pressure from the news agencies.

Tigrayan journalists who have reported on the atrocities being committed in Tigray have also been targeted and arrested in Addis Ababa. Lucy Kassa, a Tigrayan journalist is one of many who has been targeted by the Ethiopian government. She has valiantly covered the war on Tigray, publishing powerful pieces, including a piece in the LA Times on Eritrean troops' involvement in SGBV. This has led to her home being violently searched in February 2021 and being branded as a TPLF agent.

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.

ETHNIC PROFILING, WAR CRIMES, AND GENOCIDE

There are reports of widespread massacres committed by ENDF, Eritrean forces, and Amhara militias in Mai-Kadra, Zalambasa, Edaga Hamus, Axum, Adigrat, Adwa, Humera, Shire, Dengelat and their surrounding areas. There have also been reports of massacres by Eritrean forces in Adi Irob (northernmost region of Tigray bordering Eritrea).

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 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. Thousands of Tigrayans have reportedly been detained just in the capital.

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 (GSTS) association that is compiling a list of all of these incidents.

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.”

Five months into the war, at least hundreds of Tigrayans have died from starvation in Irob, Adwa, and Adigrat. The Economist wrote that “Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon” as the Tigray region is “being starved into submission.”

Eritrean forces continue to loot markets, small shops, and residences. 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 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. Over 4.5 million Tigrayans are at risk of starvation. Over 2 million children remain cut off from necessary emergency humanitarian assistance.

HEALTHCARE EMERGENCIES

The war on Tigray has caused a massive healthcare emergency affecting over 6 million people. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) reported that it took several attempts to enter Tigray. 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.

On March 22, 2021, UNICEF confirmed that assessments undertaken in some health facilities in Tigray, including Mekelle, Adigrat and Shire, show gaps in premises’ security, as well as in staffing, services and supplies. Initial assessments of 106 facilities in Tigray between December 2020 and March 2021 show that nearly 70 percent of facilities were looted, 30 percent damaged, and only 13 percent in Tigray were functional. Health services have also been rendered less functional by the displacement of many healthcare workers, in addition to non-payment of salaries.

Since November 4, 2020, there have been countless reports of Ethiopian and Eritrea forces, as well as Amhara militias raping and perpetrating sexual violence against Tigrayan women and girls. The use of weaponized SGBV has been confirmed by survivors, families of survivors, aid workers, and doctors treating women both in Tigray and in refugee camps in Sudan. Hospitals and aid agencies estimate that thousands of women have been raped, but the real number is unknown due to the Ethiopian government blocking international media coverage, imposed telecommunication blackouts, and the government's attempts to impede independent investigations of these crimes.

The evidence of weaponized SGBV is undeniable. Countless women have recounted their stories of being targeted and abused by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. According to the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA), the conservative estimated number of victims of rape in Tigray is 10,000. In Mekelle 750 rape survivors were admitted to Ayder hospital, and in Adigrat, 174 rape survivors were admitted to the public hospital.

The survivors range from young, underaged girls to grandmothers. On March 22, 2021, a doctor at a gender-based violence crisis center in Tigray told CNN that the youngest girl treated was 8 years old and the oldest woman was 60 years old. A coordinator at the gender-based violence crisis center in Tigray also reported to CNN that since the war began, up to 22 women and girls seek treatment for rape every day. That said, the actual number of survivors is unknown.

On March 22, 2021, a dozen top United Nations officials, including UN aid chief Mark Lowcock, Human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, and refugee chief Filippo Grandi, called for an end to indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians in Tigray, and in particular calling for an end to the rape and other forms of sexual violence. The statement said that: "It is essential that an independent investigation into conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray be initiated, with the involvement of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights." This comes days after U.N. Human rights chief Michelle Bachelet agreed to joint investigations in Tigray with the state-appointed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). This action by Michelle Bachelet contradicts the claims that the U.N. is calling for independent investigations into the sexual violence in Tigray by deciding to include EHRC, a non-neutral and not independent government entity.

On March 25, 2021, Wafaa Said, UN Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator in Ethiopia, said that there were more than 500 rape cases reported in five clinics in Mekelle, Adigrat, Wukro, Shire and Axum. However, she also predicts that the real number of women who have been raped is much higher. She also confirmed the stories that have been reported by independent news sources and said, "Women say they have been raped by armed actors, they also told stories of gang rape, rape in front of family members and men being forced to rape their own family members under the threat of violence."

On February 26, 2021, Amnesty International released the Axum Massacre report that proved to be a pivotal moment in the international community's response to the genocidal war in Tigray. Since the release of that report describing the harrowing details of a massacre that lasted 10 days, rhetoric employed by the international community as well as action has strengthened, while other reports of massacres have been released by international news agencies.

As a response to the Axum report, the U.S. government released a statement expressing serious concern over the situation 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."

In March 2021, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to lead the U.S.'s humanitarian response in Tigray. Their goal was to "assess the situation in Tigray, identify priority needs for the scale-up of relief efforts, and work with partners to provide urgently-needed assistance to conflict-affected populations across the region."

In addition to sending in the DART in March, the U.S. also escalated the rhetoric used when referring to the situation in Tigray. Specifically talking about the western region of Tigray, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken used the term "ethnic cleansing." He stated: "The challenge in Ethiopia is very significant. And it's one that we're very, very focused on, particularly the situation in Tigray where we are seeing very credible reports of human rights abuses and atrocities that are ongoing." In response to Blinken's strong language, Abiy immediately denied the occurrence of ethnic cleansing calling the accusations "unfounded." These statements were followed up by the Biden administration allocating \$50 million in humanitarian aid to the region and sending Senator Chris Coons to Ethiopia to discuss the situation.

One of the reports of atrocities mentioned by Blinken was released by CNN and described a massacre that occurred during a religious festival in Dengelat village in northeastern Tigray:

“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. [...] The soldiers went door to door, dragging people from their homes. Mothers were forced to tie up their sons. A pregnant woman was shot, her husband killed. Some of the survivors hid under the bodies of the dead. The mayhem continued for three days, with soldiers slaughtering local residents, displaced people and pilgrims. Finally, on December 2, the soldiers allowed informal burials to take place, but threatened to kill anyone they saw mourning.”

A few days after this report was released, Michelle Bachelet the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights addressed the situation in Tigray and made clear the need for an “independent, objective assessment” of the situation in Tigray, as her office was able to corroborate the Dengelat massacre report, as well as other reports including shelling in Mekelle, Humera, and Adigrat.



CNN continued its coverage of the situation in Tigray, reporting on the stories of refugees in Sudan. In the most powerful headline yet from international media, CNN reported “Practically this has been a genocide: Doctor says rape is being used a weapon of war in Ethiopia’s conflict.” From Hamdayet camp in Sudan, Nima Elbagir reported that rape was being used as a weapon of war “and it is that cleansing of the bloodline that these women say they’re being told is being done to them, that’s what gives this the hallmarks of a genocide [...] rather than just an unfortunate consequence of war.”

Such reports are only a fraction of what has likely been occurring in Tigray throughout months of telecommunication blackouts. Several other news agencies have reported on these massacres. The strong reporting that has finally occurred five months into the genocidal war in Tigray has led to much of the strong rhetoric and action, however limited it may be, by the United States and the international community. Such evidence and pressure is what undoubtedly led to Ethiopia finally acknowledging the atrocities and the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray.

A JOINT ETHIOPIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (EHRC) AND U.N. INVESTIGATION

On March 17, 2021, several news agencies reported that Michelle Bachalet, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, agreed to a joint investigation with the EHRC into the reported atrocities being committed in Tigray. Her office’s spokesperson Jonathan Fowler provided further details, stating that: “The U.N. Human Rights Office and the EHRC are now developing an investigation plan, which includes resources needed and practical modalities, in order to launch the missions as soon as possible.”

The agreement to such an investigation is problematic as the EHRC is affiliated with the state and hence the Abiy administration. It cannot be trusted to be unbiased and neutral and investigate any crimes that may have been perpetrated by Abiy, who is trying to use the EHRC as an institutional tool to downplay or cover war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The situation in Tigray is dire. It has the potential to be one of the most catastrophic humanitarian disasters in modern history. As has been evidenced by recent developments, international organizations and governments have begun to confirm the harrowing details mentioned in this and previous papers published by Omna Tigray. Though the situation in Tigray has garnered more attention and action in the month of March, the situation still requires more action. Specifically, the international community has to follow-up on Ethiopia's claim that Eritrean forces will leave Tigray, to continue to ensure that those in need of humanitarian assistance receive it, and a UN-led independent investigation into the atrocities being committed needs to occur. The results of a joint EHRC and U.N. investigation cannot be trusted. Furthermore, once independent, impartial investigations have been conducted, those responsible for the war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held accountable for their actions and be sent to the International Criminal Court.

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. Please reach out if any more information is desired.

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Omna Tigray

