There is a saying that rape in war is as old as war itself. Violence against women during wars has occured throughout history and still occurs today. Weaponized sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is currently rampant in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia since the unelected Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed Ali, launched a military operation to disband the elected Tigray regional government on November 4, 2020. Five months into the war, the world has now realized that this was not a simple “law-and-order enforcement operation” against the Tigrayan government, but an attack on Tigrayan civilians.

With over 2 million Tigrayans internally displaced, 70,000 Tigrayans fleeing to Sudan, over 4.5 million Tigrayans at risk of starvation, and 70,000 Tigrayan civilians massacred, the “law-and-order enforcement operation” has turned into a genocidal war in Tigray [1, 2, 3, 4]. Women and children are bearing the brunt of the genocidal war as SGBV is being used as a weapon of war and submission. It has been reported by multiple credible sources that Eritrean forces and Amhara militias have joined the war in Tigray, in addition to the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), all of whom have been reported to be perpetrators of weaponized SGBV.

**WHAT IS SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV)?**

Gender based violence (GBV) is a harmful act directed against individuals on the basis of their gender [5]. This includes sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced marriages, and traditional practices such as genital mutilation and ‘honor’ crimes. However, to classify an act as GBV, it does not have to be an act of a sexual nature. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), girls and women can also experience GBV when they are deprived of nutrition and education [6]. Women and girls are most at risk of GBV, however men, boys, and sexual and gender minorities also experience gender based violence.
Specifically, violence against women was defined by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993 as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life [7]." The Declaration also stated that, "[Violence against women] is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women...and is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men."

Sexual violence is a form of GBV. The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work [8]. The World Health Organization estimates that 1 in 3 women worldwide have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime [9]. Sexual violence can take on many different forms including: rape, attempted rape, gang rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, denial of the right to use contraception, forced prostitution and trafficking, forced nudity, sexual enslavement, castration, and sexual harassment [8].
SGBV is an umbrella term that includes any harmful acts of sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse that are directed towards an individual based on their gender [10]. These actions can take on the form of rape, sexual violence, coercion, and manipulation. These acts of SGBV are considered crimes by national and international laws. During wars and times of crisis, SGBV increases significantly for women and girls [11].

Weaponized SGBV occurs when sexual and gender violence is used as a strategy of war. Weaponized SGBV is also related to Conflict Related SGBV (CR-SGBV) which is defined by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as: "Any sexual and/or gender-based violence against an individual or group of individuals, used or commissioned in relation to a crisis or an armed conflict [12]." These acts of violence during conflict are due to systemic gender inequalities that dehumanize women and use their bodies as means to punish and intimidate populations and achieve a military goal.

The health consequences of SGBV are detrimental to the short and long term health of women. This violence can lead to severe psychological issues such as depression, post traumatic stress, anxiety disorders, sleep difficulties, and suicide attempts. Genocide rape survivors have suffered loss of identity, social isolation, loss of hope for the future, and survivor’s guilt post-genocide [13]. In addition, SGBV can result in unintended pregnancies, induced abortions, gynecological problems, and sexually transmitted infections. These women also experience recurrent reproductive, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and sexual health problems throughout their lives [14].
There are many reasons why SGBV is used in war, and in each war or conflict there are very specific reasons why SGBV was used. The most common reason is to terrorize the population. SGBV against women is a very effective war strategy because the violence not only affects women, but the entire community. Targeting women can be used as a mechanism for perpetrators to wield power through fear.

According to Gital Sahgal from Amnesty International, "Women are seen as the reproducers and carers of the community [...] Therefore if one group wants to control another they often do it by impregnating women of the other community because they see it as a way of destroying the opposing community [15]."

Another reason is that SGBV can be used as a method of ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing is defined by the United Nations as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas [16]." In terms of SGBV, these violent acts are used to erase an ethnicity through forced reproduction or through sterilizing and mutilating women’s bodies to prevent them from producing future offspring.

SGBV can also be used as a mechanism to humiliate women especially in conservative cultures and women can be shamed for being violated. SGBV has also been used as a mechanism to obtain information from communities and enact revenge. However, besides the few discussed here there are many other motives as to why SGBV is used as a weapon of war.
In the late 19th century and early 20th century, several military codes and treaties were put in place that prohibited sexual violence including rape during wars [17]. Many of these early codes and treaties focused on how perpetrators damaged a woman’s honor and her family’s reputation. They did not focus on how SGBV was used to physically torment women and terrorize populations. SGBV was not recognized as a crime against humanity or a war crime during this time. Even at the end of World War II despite mounting evidence of SGBV by armed forces, there was no mention of these sex based crimes during the Nuremberg Tribunals.

The primary post-war statute that would be used to prosecute sexual violence during war is Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. The Article was passed in 1949 and states that, “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault [18].” Wartime rape was prosecuted under military codes and domestic laws in combination with Article 27 and other international humanitarian laws that protected against wartime violations of sexual integrity. However, the international community did not begin to recognize the frequent occurrence of weaponized SGBV during conflicts and set precedents on how to prosecute sexual violence during conflicts until the late 20th century when SGBV was prevalent during the Bosnian Genocide and Rwandan Genocide.
In 1993, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognized that violence against women violated women’s rights [7]. The following year, the United Nation Commission on Human Rights condemned gender-based violence. Then in 1995, the UN World Conference on Women reaffirmed that rape by armed groups and any form of inhuman treatment of women was considered a war crime and under certain circumstances constitutes as a crime against humanity. By declaring wartime rape as a war crime, the UN World Conference was calling for governments to uphold international humanitarian laws and investigate violence against women during conflicts.

The formation of international criminal courts and tribunals during the 1990s was very important for prosecuting SGBV. Established in 1993, The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established rape as a crime against humanity [19]. Then in 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was established and took one of the most important steps towards protecting women during war by recognizing rape as an act of genocide and was the first international tribunal to define rape in international criminal law [20].

In 1998, The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC), recognized forms of sexual violence, including rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and enforced sterilization, as war crimes and crimes against humanity [21]. This statute gave the ICC jurisdiction over sexual and gender-based crimes and recognized that these actions can be used in a genocide, and thus individuals perpetrating SGBV can be charged with genocide.

More recently in 2008, the UN Security Council Resolution 1820 affirmed that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide [22].” The resolution also stated that women and girls are “particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including in some cases as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.”
SGBV has long been used as a weapon of war. There have been documented instances of genocidal rape during the second Sino-Japanese War, the Holocaust, the Bangladesh Liberation War, the Bosnian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide [23, 24]. More recently, genocidal rape has been documented in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the South Sudanese Civil War, the Rohingya genocide, and the Uyghur genocide [25, 26, 27, 28, 29]. The conflicts in Rwanda and Yugoslavia made the international community realize that rape can be used as a weapon of war due to the numerous documented cases where SGBV was used as an act of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The tribunals following these genocides were important examples on how to prosecute wartime SGBV. It is crucial to analyze these two countries’ genocides, and specifically their use of sexual violence in genocidal war to contextualize the similar events that are occurring in Tigray, as well as to understand the long-term consequences of weaponized SGBV.

In 1992, the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia which at the time included the republics of Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia [30]. The Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was composed of 3 major ethnic groups, which included Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks), Serbs, and Croats. When Bosnia-Herzegovina’s independence was declared, Bosniaks became the majority. Bosnian Serbs with the help of Serbian forces launched an ethnic cleansing campaign to eliminate the Bosnian Muslim population. The genocide lasted until 1995, and resulted in the deaths of approximately 100,000 people, 80 percent of of whom were Bosniaks [31].

Bosniaks were not only killed and put into concentration camps, but Bosniak women and girls survived SGBV. It is believed that as many as 50,000 women and girls suffered from rape and other forms of sexual violence during the genocide [32]. Serbs created “rape camps” in order to not only terrorize communities, but also to impregnate Bosniack women so as to “plant the seed of Serbs in Bosnia [33].” Some of the women who became pregnant were forced to carry their babies to term. Many women were also forced into sexual slavery and gang raped. These women are still suffering from severe psychological and physical problems from these traumatic instances of sexual violence. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) found many perpetrators of rape guilty of crimes against humanity, but did not include these acts of rape when indicting perpetrators of genocide [34, 35]. However, the ICTY noted that the rapes were part of an ethnic cleansing campaign and that there are similarities between a genocidal policy and ethnic cleansing policy. The ICTY also indicted prominent leaders of the Bosnian Serbs on counts of sexual enslavement as a crime against humanity and recognized rape as a form of torture [32, 34]. The ICTY was one of the first international courts to explicitly charge wartime sexual violence and focused a trial entirely on charges of sexual violence.
Towards the end of the Bosnian genocide, Rwanda also experienced a genocide. In 1994, the Rwandan genocide began and lasted 100 days. Members of the Hutu ethnic majority committed genocide against the Tutsi ethnic minority. It is estimated that 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were slaughtered during this conflict [36]. Sexual violence during this time was widespread and mostly against Tutsi women but also against Hutu moderates and Tutsi sympathizers. It has been estimated that between 100,000 to 250,000 women were raped during the genocide [37]. The sexual violence was coordinated and horrific. During the genocide, Hutu leaders released male AIDS patients from hospitals and formed rape squads in order to cause “slow, inexorable death” to Tutsi women [38]. Women were raped, gang raped, tortured, forced into sexual slavery, and were sexually mutilated with machetes, knives, sticks, boiling water, and acid [39]. Many of the women were raped after being tortured or after watching their family members being tortured and killed. Leaders of the genocide ordered militiamen to rape women and engage in sexual violence.

These crimes of mass sexual violence were brought to court at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which was established in 1994. The ICTR found the mass rape during the conflict to be acts of genocide [40, 41]. This was the first conviction of genocidal rape during a civil conflict and established sexual violence as a strategy employed to perpetrate genocide. These women still face extreme physical and emotional pain from these acts of sexual violence. Many women contracted HIV/AIDS and continue to be considered tainted and are shamed from their communities. It is estimated that 70 percent of rape survivors from the genocide tested positive for HIV [42]. Many women endured psycho-social difficulties in raising children that were born from rape, and because abortions were illegal at the time many women suffered physically by trying to self-induce abortions [43].

Although rape was charged as a genocidal act during the ICTR, mass rape and mass SGBV are not directly stated in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Article II of the Convention defines genocide as:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group [44].
However, the use of SGBV during war can be considered as acts “causing serious bodily or mental harm” or as a mechanism to “impose measures intended to prevent births.” Therefore perpetrators who engage in these crimes should be prosecuted as committing acts of genocide.

Since the ICTY and ICTR, there have been very few convictions of sexual violence in relation to genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes [45]. However, since the Yugoslav and Rwandan conflicts there has been active campaigns of genocidal rape in Myanmar, Darfur, and now Tigray [29, 46]. It is critically important that these tribunals serve as precedents to prosecute SGBV in current conflicts. What is happening in Tigray right now is reminiscent of the crimes that were committed in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. As a result, the use of weaponized SGBV in Tigray should be prosecuted and independently investigated by the international community such as they were during these two conflicts.

**Evidence of Weaponized SGBV in Tigray**

Since November 4, 2020, there have been countless reports of Ethiopian and Eritrean 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, family members 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. This is due to the Ethiopian government completely blocking international media coverage during the first four months of the war, imposed telecommunication blackouts, and the government’s attempts to impede independent UN-led investigations of these crimes.

According to the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Special Briefing No.3 from March 8, 2021, the conservative estimated number of victims of rape in Tigray is 10,000 [47]. That same report stated that in Mekelle 750 rape survivors were admitted to Ayder hospital, and in Adigrat 174 rape survivors were admitted to the public hospital. On March 12, 2021, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) confirmed there have been at least 516 self-reported cases of SGBV in Tigray [48]. The ECC also noted that these reports are only “the tip of the iceberg.”

Dr. Fasika Amdeselassie, a public health official for the government appointed interim administration in Tigray, reported that there were at least 829 sexual assault cases that have been reported in five hospitals since the beginning of the war [49]. However, Dr. Amdeselassie also emphasized that this number does not represent the true number of women who have been assaulted.
The numbers have only increased since EEPA’s and ECC’s reports in March. On April 1, 2021, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Ethiopia reported that 22,500 individuals are expected to seek care for SGBV in Tigray [50]. The UNFPA Ethiopia also emphasized that there is a severe lack of healthcare services in Tigray. They reported that only 1 percent of the healthcare facilities in Tigray are offering Clinical Management of Rape (CMR) services and they estimated that 156 social workers are needed to provide support to these Safe Spaces and One Stop Centers. In addition, they also reported that in Mekelle there is only one One-Stop Center and one Safe Space Center that are able to provide comprehensive treatment and care for GBV in Tigray. These reports from the UNFPA Ethiopia confirm that many women in Tigray cannot access SGBV services.

SGBV survivors ranged from young, underaged girls to grandmothers. In CNN’s report on March 22, 2021, a doctor at a gender-based violence crisis center in Tigray told CNN that the youngest girl she treated was 8 years old and the oldest woman was 60 years old [51]. However, the oldest woman so far that has been reported to be raped and assaulted was an 89 year old woman by Sky News [52]. 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.

Many women are forced to choose between sexual violence and death. A report published by Reuters in January 2021 described how a 25-year-old woman was forced by an Ethiopian soldier to choose between rape or death [53]. In another article published by Al Jazeera, Mona Lisa Abraha, an 18-year-old woman from Tembien, recounted that while fighting off Eritrean troops who were trying to rape her, she was shot in her hand and her arm [54]. Her arm was amputated after she was left bleeding for several hours. Aid workers have repeatedly confirmed stories like this in which women are being subjected to SGBV as the only alternative to death. In most cases, when these women try to resist sexual assault, they are physically attacked, shot, and left for dead.

Gang rape has also been reported throughout Tigray. The Los Angeles Times reported a story in February 2021 of a woman named Mehrawit who was gang raped by Eritrean soldiers over the course of two weeks [55]. The repeated assault resulted in the fracturing of her spine and pelvis. Another woman named Saba, from Mai Kadra, told Al Jazeera that while she and several other women were trying to leave their village, Eritrean soldiers stopped them and gang raped them [54]. A doctor in Adigrat reported that women who were in the public hospital had been gang-raped, drugged and injured during the assaults [56]. He also recounted the story of a woman in the hospital who was raped by 23 Eritrean soldiers for over ten days. By the time they found her, the surgeons had to remove long nails and plastic that had been inserted inside her. These reports indicate the extent and severity of the defilement, torture, and mutilation of Tigrayan women’s bodies during this conflict.
EVIDENCE OF WEAPONIZED SGBV IN TIGRAY CONT.

These women’s stories are only a few of the many stories of Tigrayan women being kidnaped, drugged, tortured, and raped. There have been many reports of women being kidnaped from their homes and taken to unknown military camps where they are repeatedly raped for days at a time. These military camps are essentially rape camps where women are being kept as sex slaves and horrifically brutalized and violated. There are many reports that in these camps there is a “macabre party atmosphere, during which alcohol flowed” while these soldiers are raping and beating these women [57]. A 26-year-old woman named Selam, told Telegraph that after three days of being raped in the forest, Eritrean soldiers “poured [alcohol] over our wounds. They danced standing over us” [58].” The soldiers are clearly celebrating the fact that they are abusing these women and are taking pleasure in torturing them.

In addition, military elements have been reported to force family members to rape one another or to force family members to watch as they rape women. An aid worker in Wukro described how a husband was forced to kneel and watch while Eritrean soldiers raped his wife [59]. A story published by the BBC also reported an incident in Abiy Addi, where an Ethiopian soldier ordered a grandfather to rape his granddaughter [60]. After refusing to rape his granddaughter the grandfather was shot, and as the young woman was defending herself from the soldier, she was shot in her hand and leg. On February 2, 2021, the Tigray Independence Party, Salsay Weyane Tigray, and the National Congress of Great Tigray published a joint press release where they also reported a case where a father was forced to rape his daughter at gunpoint [61]. A woman named Tirhas from Mekelle also reported that Ethiopian soldiers raped her for two weeks in a military camp [62]. After those traumatizing two weeks she returned home, but the soldiers returned two nights later and raped her while her three children were in the next room. In the March 8, 2021 Special Briefing No. 3 EEPA Situational Report, the EEPA received an eyewitness report that a woman near Wukro was raped and killed by Eritrean soldiers in front of her three sons who were not allowed to bury her body [63].
EVIDENCE OF WEAPONIZED SGBV
IN TIGRAY CONT.

There have been many more reported rapes involving relatives. Such SGBV is being used as a way to destroy the fabric of society and completely decimate the dignity of these women and their families. Ultimately, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces are strategically humiliating and violating Tigrayan women and their families.

One of the most recent horrific reports of sexual violence in Tigray was reported by Channel 4 News in March 2021 [64]. The report further describes the way troops would humiliate, rape, and physically and psychologically torture women in Tigray. In a safe house for rape survivors in Tigray, a woman shared how Eritrean troops dressed in Ethiopian military uniforms gang raped six women and were joking around and taking pictures of them. When she escaped and went home she was raped again. When she tried to escape with her 12-year-old son and other women, they were caught, kidnapped, and drugged. The soldiers took off their clothing and tied them to a rock for 10 days. People died surrounding her, and eventually the soldiers killed her son in front of her. These soldiers not only raped her multiple times, but wanted to humiliate her and psychologically destroy her. They killed her child in front of her to bring her even more pain and anguish. Her story is the story of many Tigrayan women.

These women are currently suffering extreme physical and psychological distress. Many of these women are being treated for HIV, hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted infections. In a recent March 27, 2021 Telegraph report, a woman named Selam who was kidnapped with 17 women by Eritrean soldiers was gang raped in the forest for three days [58]. After being attacked and returning home with contraceptives and HIV drugs the soldiers came to her and said, “Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be sick. That is what we are here for. We are here to make you HIV-positive.” These soldiers are admitting to purposefully trying to make these women suffer the long term consequences of a disease such as AIDS. This is very reminiscent to the stories of sexual violence in Rwanda when AIDS patients were sent to infect Tutsi women so that these women would suffer for the rest of their lives.

In addition, many of these women are now pregnant after they have been assaulted. A doctor in Hamdayet refugee camp reported that soldiers are not using condoms leaving women exposed to diseases and unwanted pregnancy [53]. In a general hospital in Adigrat, Dr. Hagos, a gynecologist reported, “out of this 200 [patients], 160 are pregnant [52].” Women are being forcibly impregnated, and are now forced to possibly raise the child of their rapist which can add to the trauma that these women are already experiencing. It is possible that similarly to the Rwandan and Bosnian children of rape these future children will be shunned by their communities, abandoned, and experience painful generational trauma.
Many women in Tigray are seeking abortions, but there are too many patients and not enough resources to care for these women. It has also been reported that women in refugee camps in Sudan are resorting to unsafe abortions due to the lack of access to abortion services in Sudan [65]. Pramila Patten also corroborated these reports by stating that, "medical centers have indicated an increase in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections [66]."

These women are also facing other health problems such as internal bleeding, stomach pain, and other injuries due to the violence inflicted on them. Further, the unknown drugs that are being injected into these women leave them unconscious for long periods of time. A doctor reported that many women are also physically abused and come to hospitals with broken bones, bruised body parts, and gunshot wounds. Samri, a 25-year-old woman, was beaten by four soldiers and "now remains prostrate in a chair, with no energy [57]." The women who try to fight their assailants are severely brutalized and left to die. Beyond physical injuries, these women are also facing depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological disorders after experiencing these horrific violations. Libération published a story about a woman who was raped for two weeks by fifteen soldiers and staff noted on her medical records that, "She has completely lost control of her consciousness and her mental state is very worrying [57]."

Survivors of SGBV have also been confronted with a lack of medical services and supplies. Many hospitals in Tigray have been looted and lack medical personnel and equipment [67]. This has left these women very few options to receive treatment. There is a shortage of rape kits, HIV medication, and post-exposure prophylaxis due to hindered humanitarian access to Tigray. Even if women are able to reach hospitals to receive treatments, hospitals are no longer safe spaces. On March 27, 2021, a Telegraph article reported how, "Soldiers enter hospitals as they like. They cross wards and threaten patients, nurses and doctors. There were recently seven raped women from Zalambessa who disappeared from their beds after seeing soldiers in the hospital [58]." These threats and disappearances have made it very difficult for women to report SGBV and to reach out to seek help during this vulnerable time. In addition, doctors working in these centers who are already traumatized from this war are also being threatened and pressured to not make rape cases public. A nurse in a rehabilitation center for SGBV survivors said that officials from the Tigray transitional government are threatening to shut down these centers because "they believe it is these centres which are making the stories of sexually abused women known to the world [and] they don’t want these stories out [58]." The transitional government and armed forces are working to hide evidence of mass rape. These women and hospital staff are forced to suffer in the dark.
Many women are not reporting their rapes due to the lack of healthcare infrastructure and police. They are afraid to report their abuses to authorities and believe that they and their families will be punished if they reveal the atrocities that they have faced. They also fear that if they return home they might be attacked again. These women are not being protected by the Ethiopian government, but instead are forced to endure even more psychological pain and fear.

The true number of women who have experienced SGBV is unknown at this point. It is believed that the number of women who have been violated is far greater than current figures because many of these acts of violence are occurring in villages outside of Mekelle and thus are not being reported. Furthermore, the stigma placed on rape survivors has also made it incredibly difficult for these women to speak about their trauma. A doctor in Mekelle reported to Libération that,

“None of [the women] will file a complaint. All they want when they come to us is to know if they are pregnant. And if so, be able to discreetly abort. This is also experienced as a trauma. We only see very few of these cases of rape, many victims do not even dare to come to us or cannot afford it [57].”

After these women are raped, they carry a heavy burden of shame and fear that they will be rejected and abandoned by their family if they reveal the horrors they have suffered.

People in Tigray are also too afraid to help rape victims. In the February 1, 2021 EEPA Situation Report No. 73, a doctor in Axum reported that Eritrean and ENDF soldiers shot people who tried to help women escape rape [68]. As a result, he said that even when they hear women screaming they no longer try to help them in fear of being killed. The SGBV that is occurring in Tigray has not only been traumatic for the women, but for the people of Tigray as a whole who are afraid to help their own people.

The stories and reports that have been discussed here are only a few of the stories of SGBV from Tigray.
WHY IS WEAPONIZED SGBV OCCURRING IN TIGRAY?

As seen in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and now Tigray, SGBV is being used as a means to control, demoralize, humiliate, and violate Tigrayans. These acts of sexual violence include rape, assault, torture, sexual slavery, and the mutilation of women's bodies. In addition, by involving the families of these women in these horrific acts, the Amhara, Ethiopian, and Eritrean troops are also destroying the entire Tigrayan family and psyche by strategically psychologically and emotionally torturing them.

There is evidence that rape against women is being used as a way to punish Tigrayans for past actions committed by the Tigray’s People Liberation Front (TPLF). Mehrawit, who was raped by Eritrean troops, said that when she asked the troops who were raping her why they were doing it, they replied, “You killed our family in the war and took Badme from us. So you deserve to be punished.” The troops are referring to the Ethiopian-Eritrean war (1998-2000) where thousands of soldiers died in a battle to control the border town of Badme.

During this conflict, it is estimated that between 80,000 to 100,000 people died and up to a million people were exiled or displaced. In 2002, an independent and impartial body called the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission ruled that Badme belonged to Eritrea. However, Ethiopia rejected the decision and refused to leave the territory resulting in a standoff between the two countries. During this conflict, Meles Zenawi, a Tigrayan, was Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, chairman of the TPLF, and chairman of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). As a result, Eritreans have long seen TPLF as an enemy and this has resulted in Eritreans also viewing Tigrayans as the enemy who should be punished, especially Tigrayan women. Another woman who was raped by Eritrean soldiers claimed that her assailants told her, “This is our time. It is time for the Tigrayans to weep.”

This attitude of punishing Tigrayans for actions the Ethiopian government took under the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), when the TPLF was a key part of the government, is not unique to this one case. Such justification for sexual violence was also reported by the EEPA in their February 2021 Situational Report No. 73 when six young girls were raped by ENDF soldiers in Mekelle. One of the girls who was raped said, “[...] when we asked them why they are raping us, while we are all Ethiopians and brothers and sisters, they said your father is Dr. Debretsson and ours is Dr. Abiy. We are not all the same.”
WHY IS WEAPONIZED SGBV OCCURRING IN TIGRAY? CONT.

Tigrayans are no longer considered Ethiopian and have been dehumanized. By othering and villainizing Tigrayans and Tigrayan women this has made it easier for troops to justify their horrific actions. These women are being attacked due to their ethnicities and their political leaders. They are collectively being punished for their identity.

The March 22, 2021 CNN report also confirmed that rape is being used as a mechanism to ethnically “cleanse” women of their Tigrayan identity. Dr. Tedros Tefera, a doctor in Hamdayet, Sudan, who has been treating SGBV survivors, reported that,

“The women that have been raped say that the things that they [Amhara forces] say to them when they were raping them is that they need to change their identity -- to either Amharize them or at least leave their Tigrinya status [...] and that they've come there to cleanse them [...] to cleanse the blood line...Practically this has been a genocide [51].”

In another report by AP news, a woman named Alem confirmed Dr. Tedros Tefera’s claims when she told reporters that she was seized by Amhara militia when she returned to her home in Humera and when she asked the militia members to speak Tigrinya they began to beat her. The men told her, “Let the Tigray government come and help you... Claim to be Amhara and we’ll give you back your house and find you a husband. But if you claim to be Tigray, we will come and rape you again [72].” She remembers three men raping her and after being violated she went to her Amhara neighbor who was present at the attack to ask for help and he said, “So what?...You came back. Behave and be quiet.” These soldiers are trying to force these women to denounce their Tigrayan identity and punish them if they refuse to do so. This is very clear evidence that rape and SGBV are being used as a means to ethnically cleanse Tigray. However, it is not just Amhara militias that are allowing this to happen, but even the woman’s Amhara neighbor dismissed her attack and essentially blamed her for being raped.
WHY IS WEAPONIZED SGBV OCCURRING IN TIGRAY? CONT.

Not only are armed forces raping Tigrayan women in order to “Amharize” them, but they are also trying to prevent Tigrayan women from giving birth to future Tigrayan children. A woman named Akberet from Humera told Al Jazeera how four Amhara militiamen raped her and inserted a hot metal rod in her genitals to burn her uterus [73]. When she begged them to stop and asked why they were doing this they told her,

“You did nothing bad to us. Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane [derogative term used to refer to the TPLF]. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.”

These actions are in direct violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. These militiamen are imposing measures intended to prevent births of Tigrayan children which constitute acts of genocide and are hallmarks of genocidal rape.

Mona Lisa Abraha, an 18-year-old girl who had her arm amputated after fighting an attempted rape, said, “Soldiers are targeting Tigrayan women to stop them giving birth to more Tigrayans [74].” These soldiers view Tigrayan women as impure and dirty, and they believe that they are diluting the Tigrayan bloodline through raping women. Soldiers are trying to exterminate the future of Tigray through these women’s wombs. This is very reminiscent of the SGBV in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. A rape survivor who is now pregnant also told CNN that, [The attacker] pushed me and said, ‘You Tigrayans have no history, you have no culture. I can do what I want to you and no one cares [51].’

The Tigrayan women are nothing in the eyes of their assailters. They have been dehumanized and their bodies are being used as a way for Ethiopian, Amhara, and Eritrean forces to erase Tigray.

These actions against Tigrayan women are coordinated and systematic. The SGBV in Tigray is not random, but repeated and targeted towards Tigrayan women. There are countless reports and stories that demonstrate that Ethiopian and Eritrean troops and militias are using SGBV as a means of committing genocide through harming the physical and mental well being of Tigrayan women and also destroying the reproductive capabilities of Tigrayan women. Weaponized rape is a war crime and is being used as a way to instigate terror not only in the women of Tigray, but throughout Tigray. The SGBV in Tigray should be independently investigated and perpetrators should be brought to justice.
The unelected Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, has repeatedly called this war a "law-and-order enforcement operation." However, the crimes the Ethiopian army, Eritrean army, and Amhara militias have committed against Tigrayan civilians during this war makes it anything but a law-and-order operation.

The use of SGBV throughout Tigray has been both acknowledged and denied by Ethiopian government officials and military officials. On January 9, 2021, an unidentified Ethiopian military official confirmed the reports of SGBV on ETV. The man said, "I was angry yesterday. Why does a woman get raped in Mekelle city? It wouldn't be shocking if it happened during the war... But women were raped yesterday and today when the local police and federal police are around [75]."

The military official clearly admitted that rape is occurring throughout Tigray, and that the police are no longer enforcing the law and allowing these rapes to occur. His statement also reaffirms the attitude of the Ethiopian army that rapes are to be expected in war. After his statements, Atakli Haile selassie, the government appointed mayor of Mekelle, said that security forces would work more closely to guarantee peace and security [75]. Nonetheless, Atakli Haile selassie has also been reported saying that the number of rapes that were cited by human right groups were grossly exaggerated.

He is not the only official who has been downplaying accusations of SGBV in Tigray. Ethiopia’s army chief Birhanu Jula Gelalcha denied the occurrence of rape, telling the BBC in February 2021 that '[Ethiopian] defense forces don't rape. They aren't bandits. They are government forces. And government forces have ethics and rules of engagement [60]." In addition, on January 26, 2021, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs denied SGBV in Tigray on Ahadu Radio saying that the claims were unfounded.

Eventually, on January 29, 2021, the Minister of Women and Children Affairs, Filsan Abdullahi, announced that a special task force was created to investigate sexual violence in Tigray. This was also announced by FANA, the Ethiopian government broadcaster. The task force reported in February 2021 that rape occurred "conclusively and without a doubt" in Tigray months after the UN and other independent organizations reported that serious crimes of sexual violence were occurring in Tigray [76]. Her statement was the first statement from Abiy Ahmed’s government to confirm SGBV during the war in Tigray and it comes after the agency denied SGBV in Tigray.

The taskforce operated in Mekelle and its surrounding area, and it is unknown if they investigated other towns and villages in Tigray where there have been serious allegations of rape and sexual violence.
However, the spokesperson of the Women’s Ministry said that they have plans to deploy experts to other areas of Tigray. This statement from the taskforce came hours after the state-appointed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said that there were 108 rapes reported in Tigray, specifically in Mekelle, Ayder, Adigrat and Wukro hospitals, over two months [77]. The commission monitored the region from January 10, 2021.

The numbers stated by the EHRC contradict the EEPA’s predicted number of 10,000 rapes having occurred in Tigray. The statements also contradict the number of rape cases that have been reported in Ayder Hospital in Mekelle and another hospital in Adigrat.

Ethiopian President Sahle-Work visited rape survivors in Mekelle on February 7, 2021. The President claimed that, “[She] spoke with those who were brave enough to speak and [she] read a lot in the eyes of those who could not [78].”

However, this is a far cry from what staffers at the facility reported. They claimed that her visit was confrontational and that when soldiers providing security for the President inspected the facility, the women cried in horror and feared that they would be assaulted again and many did not want to meet her.

A rape survivor who was raped for 8 days by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers told AFP.

“When [the President] came, we cried, we screamed, we didn’t want to talk to her...We never want to talk to her [78].”

The actions of President Sahle-Work demonstrate first-hand how the Ethiopian government has been covering up the atrocities in Tigray and lying about events in order to keep an illusion of peace in the region. It also demonstrates the inconsiderate nature of the Ethiopian government towards SGBV survivors.

On March 18, 2021, the Ethiopian Embassy in London issued a statement after Channel 4 news published a report highlighting the sexual violence of women in Tigray. The Embassy stated that, “[It] remains deeply concerned by allegations of the use of rape as an instrument of war. The government maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards rape and sexual violence, which constitute grave violations of human rights, and is treating these allegations with the utmost seriousness [79].” They also said, “Since the law enforcement operation began, the government of Ethiopia has taken concrete steps to address any human rights abuses that have occurred within the context of the conflict triggered by the TPLF...”
In addition, the Eritrean Embassy in the UK and Ireland responded by denying allegations of wrongdoing by Eritrean soldiers, and continuing to deny that Eritrean troops are in Ethiopia [80]. The Ethiopian government has not taken any concrete action to stop the SGBV in Tigray, and continues to allow foreign invaders to take part in these crimes. The Government continues to hinder humanitarian aid, hospitals are in a state of disrepair, current investigations are not urgent and not independent, and the government has not provided any support to the SGBV survivors who are currently suffering in Tigray. Instead, the Ethiopian government blames the TPLF for the crimes and authorizes rudimentary investigations into crimes in Tigray.

On March 23, 2021, days after CNN and Channel 4 news published their reports on SGBV in Tigray, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said in a speech to Parliament that he would hold accountable soldiers responsible for rape and looting in Tigray. He said, “There were atrocities that were committed in Tigray region ... reports indicate that atrocities were being committed by raping women and looting properties...Any member of the national defense who committed raping and looting against our Tigrayan sisters will be held accountable [81].” Abiy still does not clearly name who has been committing these atrocities despite reports that Eritrean forces, Amhara militias, and Ethiopian forces have been committing acts of SGBV violence against Tigrayan women. In his speech, he finally admits that Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, however he does not acknowledge that they committed crimes in Tigray.

Instead he says that, “However, after the Eritrean army crossed the border and was operating in Ethiopia, any damage it did to our people was unacceptable...We don’t accept it because it is the Eritrean army, and we would not accept it if it were our soldiers. The military campaign was against our clearly targeted enemies, not against the people. We have discussed this four or five times with the Eritrean government [82].” Abiy Ahmed made these statements after there have been numerous reports that Eritrean troops are committing horrific acts of SGBV in Tigray. He says that any wrongdoings are unacceptable, but Eritrean troops continue to commit these actions despite his “warnings.”
One of the more disturbing statements from his speech was when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said, “For [Tigrayans], it’s their women who are raped. But for us, it’s our soldiers who were assaulted by daggers.” Abiy Ahmed does two things in this statement. One, he refers to Tigrayan women as “their women.” By doing this he is further portraying an “us v them” mentality. He is implying that Tigrayan women are not “our” women, and therefore the death of “our” soldiers matter more than the rape of Tigrayan women. Two, Abiy Ahmed is trying to justify these rapes and the sexual violence against Tigrayan women as an acceptable response to attacks from Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). However, the rape of civilians during wartime is considered unlawful in international courts while attacks between military groups is not. Abiy’s spokeswoman Billene Seyoum has said that Abiy “sufficiently addressed” the reports of sexual violence during his Parliament speech. However, this is far from the truth.

The Office of the Prime Minister twitter account also tweeted on the same day as his Parliament speech, “Reports indicate that atrocities have been committed in Tigray region. Regardless of the TPLF propaganda of exaggeration, any soldier responsible for raping our women & looting communities in the region will be held accountable as their mission is to protect.” In this tweet, he continues to claim that TPLF is exaggerating the atrocities being committed in Tigray and is in essence trying to portray that the true number of women who have been raped is less than what has been stated. However, TPLF has never made public statements about the number of women who have been raped. TPLF representatives have only stated that abuses such as rape have taken place in Tigray. These claims by TPLF have already been confirmed by the UN and other independent news organizations.

Abiy Ahmed makes these statements five months after the conflict began and two months after the special task force created by the Minister of Women and Children Affairs reported that rape was occurring in Tigray. However, there has been no proof that he is holding soldiers accountable and he has not published a plan on how he will conduct investigations and hold his military and Eritrean forces accountable. In addition, Reuters reported that civilian authorities have told them that they have no ability to investigate the military and that Tigray’s police services are no longer functioning.
The Eritrean government has also been lying about the reports of sexual violence in Tigray. Yemane Chebremeskel, Eritrea’s Minister of Information, has told the Telegraph in response to their March 27th article that “Eritrean soldiers have never been accused of rape. All the fabricated stories – which are alien to our culture and laws – are peddled to cover up the crimes of the TPLF which started the war [58].” The Eritrean Embassy has also said, “If any group has used rape as an instrument of war, it is the TPLF as in the past it has routinely used this hideous crime to inflict psychological and physical anguish on its victims...there is a great deal of deliberate misreporting of facts for the sole purpose to mislead and misconstrue reality [52].” The Eritrean government is refusing to take responsibility for their crimes and like Abiy Ahmed they continue to blame the TPLF and say that all the stories are fabricated.

There is a recurring pattern of ignoring, denying, and pointing fingers at the TPLF for the human rights abuses that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have participated in. The investigations that have been conducted by the Ethiopian government are inadequate and slow. Although reports of rape have been circulating since the beginning of the war in November, investigations did not begin until January and the investigations did not occur throughout Tigray. It is important that the Ethiopian government allow aid agencies unimpeded access to SGBV survivors and allow an independent non-Ethiopian entity to investigate SGBV crimes committed across Tigray. Hospitals that have been treating these women lack the resources, rape kits, and medication to treat women who have experienced sexual violence. As of now, the Ethiopian government seems to have turned a blind eye to weaponized SGBV in Tigray.

**INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

In late January 2021, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms. Pramila Patten, stated her concerns about the allegations of sexual violence in Tigray and called for all parties to prohibit the use of sexual violence in Tigray [85]. She also called for an independent investigation into all forms of sexual violence in Tigray. This sentiment was also echoed by the UN Humanitarian Chief for East and Southern Africa, Gemma Connel, who was horrified by the reports [66]. On March 4, 2021, the UN released a report that more than 130 cases of rape have been reported in hospitals in Mekelle, Ayder, Adigrat and Wukro between December and January [86]. In addition, in March, the United Nations’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, agreed to Ethiopia’s request for a joint Tigray inquiry despite demanding an “objective, independent assessment” of reports in Tigray [87].
On March 10, 2021, US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, called the situation in Tigray an “ethnic cleansing [88].” He also called for humanitarian access and an independent investigation into human rights abuses, which includes the sexual assaults that have been occurring in Tigray. On March 18, 2021, US President Joe Biden sent Senator Chris Coons to meet with Abiy Ahmed to discuss the human rights abuses in Tigray [89].

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 called 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 [90].” This comes days after U.N. Human rights chief Michelle Bachelet agreed to joint investigations in Tigray with the state-appointed 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 nonneutral and not independent government entity that is non-compliant with the Paris Principles.

On March 25, 2021, Wafaa Said, the deputy humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia, said that there were more than 500 rape cases reported in five clinics in Mekelle, Adigrat, Wukro, Shire and Axum [91]. However, she also predicts that the real number of women who have been raped is much higher. She 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.”

In response to this statement Ethiopia’s U.N. ambassador, Taye Atskesellassie Amde, told Reuters, “Ethiopia has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual crimes and anyone found responsible for the despicable acts will be held accountable to the fullest extent of the law [91].” The ambassador does not acknowledge that Tigrayan women have been assaulted nor does he acknowledge that Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara forces have been the perpetrators of these crimes.
During a UN Security Council meeting on April 15, 2021, Mark Lowcock, a UN official, asserted that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war in Tigray [92]. This is the first time a UN official has publicly stated that weaponized SGBV is occurring in Tigray. In response to the statement, Taye Atkesellassie Amde said Lowcock is “behaving not like a humanitarian but a nemesis determined to exact some kind of retribution [92].” Amde also denied that there was a lack of humanitarian access in Tigray. Once again, the Ethiopian government repudiates all evidence of human rights violations in Tigray and villanizes those who speak against the conflict in Tigray.

Despite these concerns from the international community, Abiy Ahmed’s administration continues to deflect and block UN-led independent investigations into these very serious reports of weaponized SGBV. The Geneva Convention is no longer being enforced in Tigray and serious bodily and mental harm is being directed towards the people of Tigray. This blatant disregard to international law is enough to demand independent investigations to be mandated in Tigray. The international community has overlooked SGBV as a weapon of war and genocide in many other devastating conflicts, Tigray can no longer be overlooked.
It is clear that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have been weaponizing SGBV since the beginning of the conflict.

We are calling for an immediate stop to the crimes being committed against Tigrayan girls and women during this war. To put an end to these crimes, the international community must:

- Demand an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Ethiopian, Amhara, and Eritrean military forces from all of Tigray;
- Demand unhindered and unrestricted humanitarian access, providing emergency aid workers access to the millions of Tigrayans in need of emergency assistance, including survivors of SGBV;
- Demand survivor safe houses that ensure the safety of survivors and properly collect evidence according to international best practices;
- Demand the restoration of all forms of communication in Tigray;
- Demand unrestricted media access to all of Tigray; and
- Demand independent investigations into all SGBV crimes in Tigray so that perpetrators are prosecuted for their offenses.

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