

MAY 2021

# SITUATION

# REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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On November 4, 2020, the unelected Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed began what his administration has called a “law enforcement operation” against the rightfully elected Tigray regional government. By his own admission, Abiy mobilized the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), special forces from neighboring regions (Amhara Special Forces and Afar Special Forces), and most alarmingly, invited the army of a neighboring country - Eritrea - to wage war against the people of Tigray. Despite the repeated assertions by the Ethiopian government that this is a domestic “law enforcement operation,” the campaign against Tigray is clearly a regional war involving various domestic and international actors. And despite urgent calls by the international community, the Ethiopian government has refused to provide unhindered access to aid organizations, UN investigators or mediators.

In the six months since the war was officially declared, the over 7 million residents of Tigray have been subject to innumerable human rights violations, including massacres, extra-judicial executions, forced displacement, starvation, and lack of access to health care and essential services. A list of 1,900 Tigrayans murdered in approximately 150 mass killings was recently compiled by University of Ghent professor Jan Nyssen. He has illuminated a harrowing pattern: retaliatory killings of civilians by Eritrean or Ethiopian forces after losing a battle [1].

Despite reports of continued massacres, there is a lack of reporting on a new estimate of civilians who have reportedly died since the war started. The last recorded estimate of civilian deaths is 70,000 [2]. Additionally, over 70,000 have fled to neighboring Sudan [3] and 2.2 million are internally displaced [4]. Roughly 5 million are at risk of starvation [5]. Hundreds of reports of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces and militias are the tip of the iceberg, given that those who are able to report do so at a risk to their safety and most of rural Tigray is inaccessible.

Tigray is the Northernmost region in Ethiopia, a country in East Africa, home to an estimated 110 million people. Ethiopia has a federalist system that decentralizes power among ten regions and empowers them to exercise considerable self-governance. As such, on September 9, 2020, Tigray held regional elections in which the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) won an overwhelming 98.2 percent of the vote, securing its place as the democratically elected regional government [6].

While the November 4 declaration of war by the Ethiopian government alleged that the TPLF had launched an attack against Ethiopia's Northern Command, well-seasoned observers of Ethiopian politics emphasize that the long-term causes of the war go back far earlier than November 4, 2020 and that if the Northern Command was attacked it was a defensive move.

Despite the initial optimism with which Abiy was received, his tenure as Prime Minister has been marked by increasing political, community-level and inter-ethnic tensions and conflict. Specifically, there have been increasing hostilities towards and attacks against the region of Tigray since 2018.



The Abiy administration oversaw the systematic retirement of Tigrayan Generals and Colonels from the ENDF, closed off the major federal highway connecting the region to the capital, and blocked foreign investors from working in the region. In 2020 alone, the federal government refused to help Tigrayan farmers who were battling a devastating locust invasion, withheld safety net program funds allocated by Western donors, and suspended crucial gasoline supplies to Tigray. As such, despite the Prime Minister's claim that the alleged attacks against the military base in Tigray 'caused' the war, there is ample evidence to show the ramping up of hostilities, attacks and dangerous rhetoric against Tigray and Tigrayan people in the years before the war.

## **ERITREA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR ON TIGRAY**

Although Abiy has repeatedly asserted that his government is engaged in an internal "law enforcement operation," the involvement of the Eritrean army in the Tigray war has been reported by numerous domestic and international observers. In addition to the carrying out extrajudicial executions, indiscriminate shelling, and widespread looting, the Eritrean troops have also been implicated in the massacre of civilians.

A February 2021 Amnesty International report revealed that Eritrean troops killed hundreds of unarmed civilians in the city of Axum on November 28-29, 2020. Despite overwhelming evidence - including international reporting, photographs, and video footage from the region - Abiy, as well as his counterpart in Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, denied the presence of Eritrean soldiers inside Tigray for months. It was only amid mounting international pressure that PM Abiy finally acknowledged - in a March 23 address to parliament - the presence of Eritrean soldiers on Ethiopian territory.

In a letter to the UN Security Council on April 16, 2021, Eritrea finally confirmed its presence in Tigray and expressed it had "agreed - at the highest levels - to embark on the withdrawal of the Eritrean forces and the simultaneous redeployment of Ethiopian contingents along the international boundary" after months of repeated denial by President Isaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Abiy. This was largely due to mounting pressure from the European Union and the U.S' Biden Administration.

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Al Jazeera, "Eritrean soldiers killed hundreds," March 2021



Foreign Policy, "The U.N. Must End the Horrors," March 2021

There is little evidence to believe that Eritrean forces are withdrawing from Tigray. There are credible concerns that Eritrean forces are embedding themselves further within the intelligence and military of the Ethiopian government, given their common goal of eradicating the TPLF and weakening Tigray. The announcement of the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray reads as political theater, considering that Abiy justified Eritrea's crossing of the border into Ethiopia as a response to TPLF's provocations and to the suddenly weakened Ethiopian military, which could not ensure security guarantees to Eritrea. He assured parliament that once Ethiopia rebuilds its pre-war military capacity it would be able to guard its own borders and the issue of Eritrean troop presence in Tigray would be resolved.

The withdrawal of Eritrean troops has not happened, and instead there have been claims of brigades returning to Eritrea with the purpose of replenishing their personnel and reorganizing their military units. Additionally, the unresolved border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been sidelined by the two leaders in an effort to eliminate the TPLF. Therefore, given that a boundary has not been officially demarcated on the ground, it can be assumed that border disputes will likely continue to flare up. Resolving the contentious border issue is paramount to negating any possibility of grounds for any party to cross a mutually accepted, defined international border between Tigray and Eritrea in the future.

A devastating locust invasion and the federal government's refusal to distribute donor funding for crucial programs had already exacerbated food insecurity in Tigray, prior to the onset of the war. International agencies, including the UN, raised concerns about the disruption of aid and the looming threat of famine as early as November 2020. Since then, the war has completely decimated crops, agricultural production, livestock and the very means of subsistence for millions of people in the region. Rather than being incidental to the war, the destruction of agricultural products and livelihoods appears to be a systemic and organized campaign by the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops, who have reportedly looted and burned crops, slaughtered farm animals and destroyed silos.

Officials from the region's interim administration, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Red Cross have all been warning since January 2021 that hundreds of thousands of people are at risk of starving to death. The Ethiopian government, instead of mobilizing aid to its citizens in Tigray, blocked humanitarian agencies and aid from the region for months, actively exacerbating and weaponizing starvation.

UN humanitarian officials have decried the severity of the starvation crisis in Tigray, where recorded malnutrition levels have been on the rise. In an early March assessment, the UN found that acute malnutrition among children under the age of 5 greatly exceeded known emergency thresholds. According to a May 5 MSF project update, these emergency thresholds have specifically been surpassed in pockets in the outskirts of the city of Shire and in Sheraro [7]. And, while the number of people in need of immediate humanitarian assistance was estimated to be 4.5 million in April, a May 4 report by Oxfam shows that over 5 million people are facing extreme hunger [8].



The National News, "World Peace Foundation," April 2021



SBS News, "Ethiopia's Tigray region," November 2020



This news came after claims Eritrean troops would be withdrawing from the region. Instead, their forces have blocked the movement of humanitarian staff trying to deliver support to children experiencing severe acute malnutrition. France 24 reported on April 27 that aid workers providing food relief had been forced out of multiple areas by Eritrean soldiers. Blockage of the crucial road running west from Adigrat to Shire and the main road connecting Mekelle to Adigrat has also been reported. Transportation between Mekelle and Shire (now home to thousands of internally displaced peoples) thus has been inaccessible. There is an alternative route, but Lowcock has expressed the reason for this retaliatory denial of access by Eritrean and Amhara forces could be that the children are in an area currently controlled by the TPLF.

Not only are Tigrayans facing weaponized and man-made starvation today, the spectre of famine haunts the future of the region. Because of the organized and systematic destruction of farming equipment, seeds and supplies, it is impossible for farmers to prepare their fields ahead of the rainy season in June 2021. This disruption of the harvest cycle will fuel and worsen hunger and starvation in the coming years. The head of the Tigray Interim Administration's Bureau of Agriculture warned of unprecedented danger to Tigray in the next three to four years, stating that this war may induce the worst famine in the history of the country.

## **HEALTHCARE EMERGENCIES**

The war has also caused a massive healthcare emergency affecting over 6 million people. 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. 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 by MSF 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. The entire regional healthcare system is collapsing.

On March 25, 2021, MSF reported that an aid team and two public minibuses were stopped by soldiers in the aftermath of an apparent ambush on an army convoy on a main road. The passengers had to leave the buses; four men were separated from women and shot. The killings took place on the road between the regional capital, Mekelle, and the city of Adigrat. MSF's three staff members were traveling in their clearly marked vehicle when they encountered military vehicles that were on fire [10].

## WEAPONIZED SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV)

Sexual violence has been deployed as a weapon and strategic tool in the genocidal war taking place in Tigray. Almost one-third of all attacks on civilians in Tigray involve sexual violence, as reported by the New York Times [11]. Nearly a quarter of reports received by one agency involve gang rape. In some cases women have been repeatedly raped over a period of days, amounting to what Dr. Fasika Amdeselassi, the top public health official for the government-appointed interim administration in Tigray, has described as sexual slavery [12]. According to Dr. Fasika, more than 829 cases of sexual assault have been reported. Given the risks associated with reporting sexual violence, including retaliatory violence, it is estimated the number is much higher.

Stories do surface, however, and when they do their details are heard to hear. The April 15 briefing to the U.S. by UN Representative Mark Lowcock recounted the story of a survivor who arrived in Shire as an Internally Displaced Person (IDP). After hiding from the conflict in her hometown for six days with her family, she gave birth to a newborn who subsequently died a few days later at the same time her husband was killed. When she resumed her journey for shelter and safety in Shire, she encountered four Eritrean soldiers who raped her in front of the rest of her children throughout the night and into the next day. Additionally, a USAID report details the testimony of a young woman who recalled her rapist claiming he was "cleansing the blood lines" of Tigrayan women, a statement illustrative of the use of rape as a tool of ethnic cleansing and genocide [13].



Daily Sabah, "Crisis deepens as conflict in Tigray," November 2020



African Arguments, "Eritrea in the Tigray war," January 2021



DW, "Anger and collective trauma," March 2021

According to an in-depth interview by NPR's Eyder Peralta, the violence against women is having detrimental psychological effects:

**"Yesterday, I met a 19-year-old who says she was raped by Eritrean soldiers. And I met a 65-year-old woman who told me that she was raped by an Ethiopian soldier. And the thing she kept saying is that she was a religious woman and that maybe this was a curse from God. And I told her, look. This isn't your fault. And she just kept shaking her head. And she said that she can't sleep anymore, that she can't eat anymore. And right now, she says she's just waiting to die [14]."**

On March 22, 2021, a dozen top UN 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 read:

"It is essential that an independent investigation into conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray be initiated, with the involvement of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [15]."

This came days after UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet agreed to joint investigations in Tigray with the state-appointed the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). This agreement by Michelle Bachelet contradicts the UN's call for independent investigations into the sexual violence in Tigray by deciding to include the EHRC, a biased, state-funded, non-independent entity.

Ultimately, the most tangible act to end the sexual and gender based violence occurring in Tigray is to end the war and remove all military forces from the region.

(For a comprehensive report on the SGBV situation in Tigray refer to Omna Tigray's SGBV Report [16] linked on the last page of this report.)

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The U.S. deployed a disaster response team to Tigray last month (March 2021), however, its personnel and aid partners still need greater, unhindered and sustained access to civilians in the region according to Emily Dakin, senior USAID official leading the response in Tigray. The U.S. is also funding about 30 mobile healthcare and nutrition teams that are operating throughout the region. Threats to unfettered humanitarian aid remain the unpredictability of violent clashes and the blocking of key highways/aid delivery routes. This has rendered many attempts at a significant response impossible.

As reported by Devex, the European Commission plans to “decommit” more than \$120 million from Eritrea in an attempt to end their “dual-track” program of developmental assistance and political dialogue. The funding had been approved for nine projects in Eritrea, including roadwork. Their letter noted that Eritrean troops’ involvement in the Tigray conflict in northern Ethiopia had “further compounded” the situation. With a December 2021 deadline to recommit the money, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, noted that she would propose it go to other priorities in the Horn of Africa, including allocating €18 million for refugees in Sudan fleeing Tigray.

On April 15, 2021, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield released a statement calling on the UN Security Council to speak with one voice to end the hostilities and for the Ethiopian government to withdraw Eritrean and Amhara regional forces from Tigray. The allowance of an international investigation into human rights abuses and violations and unhindered humanitarian access was also reiterated.

On April 23, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken named seasoned former U.S. and UN diplomat Jeffrey Feltman as a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. Jeffrey Feltman expressed serious concern over the conflict, explaining the continued fallout could create a scenario with more devastating effects than the Syrian crisis [17].

Beyond condemnations and expressions of outrage, the international community has had little impact on the ground in Tigray. Many Tigrayans both in-country and among the diaspora have expressed sentiments of being abandoned and failed not only by the federal government for their involvement in these crimes, but by the world.

## **REGIONAL INSTABILITY**

In Somalia, two key regional states have objected to the term extension of President Farmajo amid disagreements over the electoral process. They accuse him of deploying his supporters among national and regional electoral bodies as he plans to seek a second term after four years of leadership [18]. This growing conflict is leading to dissent and further violence across the Horn of Africa.

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Sudan's Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas claimed Ethiopia had "objected" to an invitation for a three-way summit to discuss stalled negotiations over the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) in a series of Twitter posts on April 23, 2021 [19]. Over a decade of inconclusive talks has led to a standstill between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over the construction and operation of the GERD, which broke ground in 2011.

Sudan and Egypt had proposed including the European Union, the United States, and the UN as mediators in the dispute in addition to continuing African Union facilitation of the talks, a proposal that has been rejected by Ethiopia [20]. Sudan has shared intentions to file lawsuits against the Italian company building the dam and against the Ethiopian government, if Ethiopia goes ahead with its plans [21]. Escalating language on the parts of Sudan and Egypt are motivated by attempts to internationalize the issue, during a period of Ethiopian instability and slashed aid flow.

## **CALLS FOR A UN-LED INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION**

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has gathered five times to discuss the conflict in Tigray behind closed doors. China and Russia, permanent members of the Council, have repeatedly subverted efforts by other members to go beyond discussing the humanitarian situation and release any form of condemnation against ongoing human rights abuses. Mounting evidence of war crimes and other atrocities in Tigray continues to grow by the day. In a special UNSC session in March 2021, the Council was unable to reach a consensus and failed to issue a statement. In another session in late April 2021, a public statement was released drafted by Ireland and agreed to by the 15-member council, expressing concern about the humanitarian situation (specifically SGBV) after being briefed five times privately since the conflict began.

There are continued calls for an independently-led investigation and for the UNSC specifically to step up given the current blatant disregard for human suffering. As outlined by Laetitia Bader of Human Rights Watch, recommendations include calls for a public session condemning the human rights abuses and voicing clear support for independent oversight of humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, an independent, international investigation into war crimes is the first step for a credible accountability process. There should also be clarity regarding the consequences of failing to cooperate with such efforts for all involved parties.

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The situation in Tigray is extremely dire and worsening every day. Multiple international bodies, government officials, and international agencies have emphasized the catastrophic level of disaster and the impact of this conflict on the people of Tigray. The harrowing details mentioned in this and previous papers published by Omna Tigray are confirmed by reputable international news sources. Despite increasing attention and action in the month of April, the situation still requires more action.

Specifically, the international community has to follow up on Ethiopia's claim that Eritrean forces will leave Tigray and to continue to ensure that those in need of humanitarian assistance receive it. It is imperative that a fully independent UN-led investigation into the ongoing war crimes in Tigray is conducted. We reiterate that the results of a joint investigation led by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN would be compromised and thus would not give an accurate or comprehensive picture of the damage that has been caused in Tigray. Neutral investigations are the first step to ensuring accountability through the International Criminal Court for the perpetrators of these war crimes.

Omna Tigray has created accessible resources with further explanations and gathered reputable sources of information pertaining to the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Tigray across several social media platforms and websites. Please reach out if any more information is desired.

Omna Tigray

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CNN, "Ethiopia crisis: Two missiles," November 2020



CBS News, "Reports of executions and mass-rape," March 2021

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