INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia launched a genocidal war against the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Since the beginning of the war, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara regional forces have committed heinous war crimes to actively destroy Tigray and eliminate all Tigrayans. A frightening war tactic that is being used in this genocide is starvation. The Ethiopian government is using hunger as a weapon of war to control and exterminate the Tigrayan population. Abiy Ahmed’s government has repeatedly claimed that no one has died from hunger during the war. However, this is a falsehood that has been concocted by the government to hide their crimes.

WEAPONIZED STARVATION

All modern famines are in some way man-made. Even if famines are triggered by natural factors; inadequate aid distribution, willful ignorance of suffering, and political interference underlie modern famines. Six out of ten people struggling with food insecurity live in countries affected by violent armed conflicts [1]. However, there is a difference between when conflicts result in food insecurity and when hunger is used as a tactic of war to punish and control a population.

When the starvation of a population is deliberate, then hunger is being used as a weapon of war. Purposely destroying food sources and impeding aid access are criminal offenses for which the international community is supposed to hold perpetrators accountable. The 1949 Geneva Conventions states that attacks on “objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population,” are prohibited. In addition, Article 54(1) of the 1977 Additional Protocols of the 1949 Geneva Conventions explicitly prohibits the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in international armed conflicts [2]. Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions also prohibits starvation in non-international armed conflicts.

The Rome Statute Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) states that deliberate starvation of civilians as a method of war is a war crime that can be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC). However, under the Rome Statute starvation was only considered a war crime in international armed conflicts and not in non-international armed conflicts [3, 4]. This meant that the ICC could not prosecute starvation during civil wars. This frustrating gap in international criminal law made it difficult to prosecute weaponized hunger in past conflicts, despite the fact that weaponized hunger is a criminal offense according to the Geneva Conventions.
It was not until the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 2417 in 2018 that the Council explicitly banned the use of starvation as a weapon of war [5]. This led to amending the Rome Statute to include starvation as a war crime in non-international armed conflicts in Article 8(2)(e)(xix) in 2019 [6]. This amendment allowed the ICC to prosecute weaponized starvation in any conflict as a war crime.

Furthermore, starvation could fall within the described tools of genocide as per Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defines genocide as intentionally destroying a group through:

- Killing members of the group;
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group [7].
Weaponized starvation can be categorized as “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” and “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” Hence, it is imperative that those involved in perpetrating genocide through hunger are prosecuted under international law and that the international community recognizes that the situation in Tigray is an active state-sponsored genocide.

As of today, weaponized hunger in any conflict is considered a war crime. Even Ethiopian national legislation states that the starvation of civilian populations is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from five years to twenty-five years, or, in more serious cases, with life imprisonment or death [8]. As a result, the Ethiopian and Eritrean government should be prosecuted to the fullest extent for the mass starvation they have inflicted on the Tigrayan population.

Weaponized Starvation in Tigray

Richard Pankhurst, a historian specializing in Ethiopian history, documented that between the 15th and 19th centuries, there was, on average, at least one famine every decade in Ethiopia [9]. Further, the use of hunger as a weapon of war is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia, and has been previously used as a war tactic to weaken Tigray.

Famines in Tigray are recurring and are due to a combination of environmental factors and indifference and hostility from political leaders. In more recent Ethiopian history, starvation was concealed from the world during Haile Selassie’s imperial regime from 1930 to 1974. During his rule, there were famines in Tigray and other regions in Ethiopia in 1954 to 1958, 1965 to 1967, and 1973 to 1974 [10, 11].

He deliberately ignored the suffering of Tigrayans, and actively withheld aid from regions that opposed him. After Haile Selassie was overthrown by the Derg military junta led by Mengistu Hailemariam from 1983 to 1985, a widespread famine left over 1.2 million dead in Ethiopia [12]. Tigray was targeted by the Derg in order to defeat the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). During the Derg regime, crops and livestock were destroyed, trade was restricted in Tigray, farmers were displaced, and Tigray’s infrastructure was destroyed.
Currently in Tigray, the World Food Programme estimates that 5.2 million individuals are in need of food aid [13], a number supported by an Oxfam statement released in May 2021 [14]. The Ethiopian government has also confirmed that 91 percent of the Tigrayan population needs humanitarian aid [15]. However, in reality, every single Tigrayan has been affected by this genocidal war. In their April 2021 report, the World Peace Foundation (WPF) estimated that there are around 50 to 100 excess deaths every day as a direct result of food insecurity in Tigray [16].

In addition, malnutrition has been seen throughout Tigray, especially in remote communities. Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) documented an increase in moderate acute malnutrition across Tigray with people in some areas already suffering from severe acute malnutrition [17]. MSF reported that pregnant women and children are malnourished, and healthcare workers in Tigray were seeing children dying from pneumonia and malnutrition.

Before the war, most of Tigray was at a stressed level of hunger [18]. The hunger crisis has now become so severe that people have resorted to eating leaves to survive [19]. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) has determined that all of Tigray is currently facing or will be facing either crisis or emergency hunger levels [20]. The FEWS NET has also stated that their early warning system detects famine in Tigray. Famine is the final stage of the UN’s Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).
To declare famine is a very rigorous process and indicates extreme lack of food, death, destitution, and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels. Famine is declared when at least one in five households face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; more than 30 percent of the population is suffering from acute malnutrition; and at least two people out of 10,000 are dying every day [20]. This early warning of famine by FEWS NET highlights the gravity of the situation in Tigray, and the urgent need for the international community to take action. It is important for the international community to recognize that the crisis in Tigray is not just a famine, but it is a man-made famine.

Abiy Ahmed is using old war tactics previously used by Haile Selassie and Mengistu Hailemariam to subjugate the people of Tigray. Since waging the war on Tigray, Abiy Ahmed has actively enforced policies that are destroying the region and starving the population.

Using weaponized hunger as a political tactic can be divided into acts of commission, omission, and provision [21]. Currently in Tigray, there have been reports of acts of commission and omission; however, it is not a stretch to assume that acts of provision (the selective distribution of aid) are also occurring in Tigray. These actions are enough to implicate the Ethiopian and Eritrean government in war crimes.
Acts of commission occur when there are attacks on food production and markets, and when people’s movement is limited. For six months, Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) as well as Eritrean and Amhara forces have been moving throughout Tigray burning crops and destroying farmland. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for most Tigrayans, as around 80 percent of the population are subsistence farmers [22]. By actively destroying farming, the Ethiopian government is aware that they can very effectively decimate the livelihood of Tigrayans and starve Tigray.

Pillaging and destruction has been reported throughout Tigray. Tesfay Getachew, a farmer in Tigray reported that

“Crops were burnt down in some places including mine. The total loss of my crop – an estimated 1.5 ton – could have fed my family of seven at least for ten months [23].”

Birhane Haleform, a day laborer in Tigray, reported to the Los Angeles Times that ENDF soldiers burned crop fields and urinated in grain stores to spoil the food [24]. Satellite images have confirmed the burning of land and grain stores throughout Tigray. In Gijet, Southern Tigray, 508 structures, including grain stores, were purposefully burned [25]. The WPF presented satellite images taken by Maxar Technologies from Dansheha, Western Tigray showing the destruction of crop fields and warehouses [16]. The WPF also published satellite images of more than 50 farm plots that were burned in Maychew, Southern Tigray, in December [16].

ENDF and Eritrean forces are also stealing crops from farmers. Kidu Gebregirgis, a Tigrayan farmer, reported to the Associated Press that Amhara militia harvested 5,000 kilograms of sorghum (a cereal grain) from his land and took it for themselves [26]. In Amnesty International’s Axum massacre investigation, residents described to reporters how Eritrean soldiers stole sugar and flour from Guna Trading, looted a community store called May Akko, stole flour and animal fodder from Dejen Flour Factory, and looted a university student grocery store [27]. Markets throughout Tigray have been looted and destroyed. Ethiopian forces have indiscriminately shelled urban areas including homes, hospitals, school, and markets. Due to these attacks, many markets remain closed, making it impossible for Tigrayans to purchase food and basic necessities. In every town that is occupied by military forces, soldiers have robbed Tigrayans of all their food and have purposefully destroyed any food sources in an effort to starve the population.

Not only are crops being destroyed, but livestock from Tigray have been stolen and killed. Refugees in Sudan have reported that soldiers were stealing cattle [28]. There have also been numerous reports throughout Tigray of ENDF, Eritrean, and Amhara soldiers stealing sheep, camels, donkeys, and oxen as well. A priest from Rewasa, Western Tigray, reported to Reuters.
“[Amhara forces] circulated a paper saying, ‘If you don’t leave the area within two days, you will lose your lives.’ Then they took all the cattle and everything in the house [29].”

Armed forces are forcibly removing Tigrayans from their land and stealing their property to truly leave them with nothing. Farmers have also been forced to kill their livestock for invading soldiers. A witness in Tigray reported to Vox News that Eritrean soldiers will kill an ox to eat one leg and leave the rest to rot [30]. The unnecessary killing of livestock is extremely detrimental to Tigrayans due to the high cost of owning livestock and the agricultural importance of livestock for ploughing and fertilizing farmland. The witness told Vox News, “The people are either dying by blood or hunger.”

Another aspect of acts of commission in relation to weaponized hunger is the restriction of movement. The ability for people to freely move in order to obtain food or income is critically important in situations where there is a lack of food. In Tigray, in addition to the active destruction of crops and livestock, many Tigrayans have been prevented from leaving their villages. Currently, there are 2 million internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Tigray with many individuals fleeing to cities to survive. However, many Tigrayans face grave danger trying to flee villages due to the heavy presence of ENDF and Eritrean soldiers along the roads to many cities [16].

Most recently in March 2021, MSF staff witnessed four men being dragged from a bus and executed by Ethiopian soldiers [31]. To add to the devastation, if these IDPs are able to survive their journeys to the cities, there is still barely any aid reaching these IDP camps. Therefore, many Tigrayans in remote villages are staying near their land and hiding when military forces arrive. Rural Tigrayans who are unable to leave their villages are starving and cannot access aid or money and cannot work. Urban Tigrayans have reported that, “Food aid only comes to towns and large villages along the main roads, in minimal amounts. They do not bring it to the rural areas, and they do not call the people from the rural areas to collect it in town [32].”
Acts of omission occur when there is a failure to act. The Ethiopian government has repeatedly failed to stop the impending famine in Tigray. Before the war even began, the Ethiopian government had already taken steps to block aid to Tigray to punish Tigrayans for holding democratic elections in September 2020 when the federal government had postponed national elections. The Ethiopian government has chosen to remain inactive while fully informed that all of Tigray is starving.

In the months leading up to the war and even now, a locust outbreak has been wreaking havoc throughout Tigray. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the locust invasion was the worst in 25 years [33]. In an interview with the broadcasting channel Fana, Dr. Abadi Girmay, the interim head of Tigray’s Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development said that 25 percent of Tigray’s harvest was destroyed by the locust invasion [34]. While Tigray was at risk of starvation, the Ethiopian government halted funding to Tigray in retaliation for holding constitutionally-mandated regional elections which the Ethiopian government deemed “illegal”. Tigray was due to receive 10.4 billion Ethiopian birr ($281 million) for the fiscal year [35].

At the same time, the federal government also suspended a quarterly budget of $285 million birr that the World Bank provides in order to support safety net programs in Tigray [36]. These safety net programs are important for providing food and cash payments to Tigrayans, and also help implement soil and water conservation programs. In addition, the payments are used to build health and education infrastructure in Tigray. These actions by the federal government were illegal and were intentionally employed to weaken Tigray before the war was officially declared. The timing of the war during Tigray’s harvest season and the aforementioned restricted funding has left many farmers unable to reap their harvests.

Once the war began, the Ethiopian government actively took steps to stop aid from reaching Tigray. Transport was not allowed to and from Tigray, leaving aid agencies unable to provide aid. In December 2020, the Ethiopian government forged a deal with the UN and claimed that there would be “unimpeded, sustained, and secure access” to Tigray [37]. This proved to be a complete lie and access to Tigray has been continually impeded since this agreement was made. The problem is not that there is no aid to send to Tigray, but agencies have been stalled and prevented from accessing the region. Six months after Abiy Ahmed claimed that there was full humanitarian access to Tigray, there is still no access to aid in most of the region.
According to the May 3, 2021 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) humanitarian update report, almost all of Tigray remains either partially accessible or hard to reach [38]. Mekelle is the only region of Tigray that is accessible. In a survey of 614 Tigrayans, conducted by an independent research group Humanitarian Outcomes, almost all respondents said that they needed help and that food aid was the most common aid required followed by healthcare, water, and sanitation services [39]. Moreover, only 43 percent of the respondents said that they had received at least some help, but that this help was not enough and not reaching the areas most in need.

The Ethiopian government is also using hunger as a mechanism to control the local governments in Tigray. It was reported that in Adi Daero, Northwestern Tigray,

“Residents were denied food aid after the town’s inhabitants refused to appoint PP [Prosperity Party] officials as administrators. The residents demanded the evacuation of Eritrean soldiers instead [32].”

In 2019, Abiy Ahmed merged the four party Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to form the PP, which the TPLF refused to join. Since the TPLF’s act of defiance in 2019, Abiy Ahmed has tried to control Tigray politically through repeatedly removing TPLF officials from government posts, severing relations with elected Tigrayan leaders, and now starving the Tigrayan people. Food is being wielded as a mechanism for the Ethiopian government to control the population. This is another example of Abiy Ahmed’s government refusing to recognize democracy in Tigray and instead installing illegitimate leaders to preside over Tigray.

Aid efforts are not only being blocked by the Ethiopian government, but any aid that is able to reach Tigray is not being distributed by ENDF, Amhara, and Eritrean forces. Because these armed forces are charged with the distribution of aid, Tigrayans have been prevented from accessing food.

Armed forces are deliberately blocking food from Tigrayan citizens simply because of their ethnicity. Maza Girma told Associated Press that when she went to the government office in Bahkar to request food the distributors told her, “Go home, you’re Tigrayan [26].” Witnesses are also reporting that ENDF and Eritrean soldiers are withholding food aid from families who they believe are related to Tigrayan fighters. A witness from Irob reported to the Associated Press that Ethiopian authorities told Tigrayans who were trying to receive aid, “If you don’t bring your father, your brothers, you don’t get the aid, you’ll starve [40].”
In April 2021, Agence France Press (AFP) obtained government documents proving that Eritrean soldiers are blocking and looting food aid [41]. In an Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) presentation to aid agencies, the ECC reported that Eritrean soldiers would show up at food distribution points in Tigray and loot supplies and frighten aid workers. The document also reported that Eritrean soldiers were forcing humanitarian workers out of multiple parts of Tigray. The Eritrean government has denied these claims, but ENDF General Yohannes Gebremeskel Tesfamariam, head of a command post in Tigray, said that in the "last two weeks we had access problems passing some of the checkpoints, especially ones controlled by Eritreans." The General is waiting for a response from Eritreans, however the Ethiopian government has not taken any steps to stop Eritrean forces from hindering aid.

In fact, Eritrean troops have been disguised in old Ethiopian military uniforms and are obstructing and occupying aid routes [42]. The Ethiopian government has been useless and they are admitting that they have completely lost control of Eritrean soldiers who are greatly contributing to the food crisis in Tigray. This government document is also further proof that the Ethiopian government is well aware of the starvation in Tigray and is failing to act.

ENDF and Eritrean forces are also forcing Tigrayans to lie about having received aid in order to hide their crimes. There have been reports that residents in Shire and Adwa were forced to sign that they had received 15kg of wheat when they had only been given 7kg [32]. A resident of Adigrat reported that, "They [soldiers] registered us four times saying that they will give aid but none was given. We think that the people who register us are taking the grain for themselves and resell it [32]."
Witnesses have also gathered evidence that aid is not being distributed to Tigrayans, but instead is being transported to Eritrea by the Eritrean soldiers or is being used to feed Eritrean soldiers [16]. This is part of the Ethiopian government’s campaign to mask the war crimes occurring in Tigray as they continue to propagate false narratives that aid is reaching Tigray.

It is not only the active impeding of food aid to Tigray that is resulting in this mass starvation, but the closure of banks and microfinance institutions throughout Tigray has prevented individuals from being able to purchase food. Around 450,000 farmers, 40 percent of rural families, had savings in local microfinance institutions [43]. In November 2020, the National Bank of Ethiopia closed all banks in Tigray and banking services did not resume until the end of December as a way for Abiy Ahmed to feign normalcy in Tigray. However, banks have only reopened in Mekelle, and there is still no access to cash in the rest of Tigray. This has hindered the ability for many Tigrayans to access the money that they need to purchase food.

Not only can Tigrayans no longer access their funds, but food prices have been high since the beginning of the war, making it difficult for people to purchase food. For example, in December 2020, tomatoes were being sold at 100 birr per kilo instead of 20 birr per kilo, and potatoes were being sold at 40 birr per kilo instead of 10 birr per kilo [44]. This increase in food prices is a result of the destruction of farming and trade markets in Tigray which has made food scarce. This strategy by the Ethiopian government and Eritrean government has effectively starved Tigray and has made Tigrayans reliant on food aid that is not even reaching them.

According to Alex de Waal and Bridget Connely, there are three necessary elements to identify starvation crimes: (i) an indication of intent; (ii) the acts of destroying the means for producing, processing and distributing food and water supplies alongside other objects necessary for life; displacing people away from resources necessary for life; or impeding humanitarian access to vulnerable populations; and (iii) an outcome which includes suffering and increased mortality, associated with deprivation of food, and/or other objects and activities necessary to sustain life (including health and shelter) [45]. All these elements are present in Tigray as laid out in this article, and it is clear that starvation is being used to punish, exterminate, and weaken Tigrayans. The direct actions of the Ethiopian and Eritrean government and their inaction to control their military personnel is resulting in this humanitarian crisis in Tigray. This is not a war between armed forces, but a war against the civilians of Tigray.
IMMEDIATE ACTION TO RESTORE FARMING IN TIGRAY

Besides immediately opening all humanitarian corridors and ejecting all foreign invaders from Tigray who are preventing food aid from reaching Tigrayans, one of the most important steps to end this hunger crisis is to allow farmers to return to their farms and harvest this season. Kiremti rainy season lasts from June to September, and farming preparations begin in mid-April for most of Tigray [16]. Crops are harvested between September and February. The 2020 harvest was interrupted by the beginning of this genocide. At this point, Tigrayan farmers are running out of time to prepare their land to farm. If Tigrayans miss this farming season, they will not be able to harvest food for the next 18 months which will cause this crisis to spiral even more out of control and exacerbate food insecurity.

It is not only an issue of farmland being destroyed in Tigray, but there are no seeds to plant, no fertilizer, no tools, and no oxens to plough the land. Dr. Abadi, a Tigray interim government official, estimates that 200 million birr is needed to return to a normal functioning state [34]. To return Tigray’s agricultural infrastructure to what it was before the war is impossible at this point. However, allowing Tigrayan farmers to return to their harvest is critically important and will have a huge impact on how Tigray will recuperate from this famine now and for years to come.

The Ethiopian government’s efforts to prevent Tigrayans from farming was acknowledged by Abebe Gebrehiwot, deputy head of Tigray’s interim government, in an interview with a state-run television network [46]. During the interview, Abebe admitted that Tigrayan farmers have been impeded from farming, especially around Shire and Hawzen. In addition, he described how vehicles transporting seeds have been blocked from reaching areas beyond Kobo, which is located South of Tigray. Abebe very clearly states that these efforts are sending the message to “Let the people of Tigray perish with starvation.”
DEMANDS

It is clear that the Ethiopian government, with help from the Eritrean government, is using hunger as a weapon of war. The international community must recognize that war crimes are being committed in Tigray and that starvation is being used as a tool of genocide. We are calling for:

- The immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all invading forces, including Ethiopian, Amhara, and Eritrean military forces, from all of Tigray;
- Unhindered and unrestricted humanitarian access to all of Tigray;
- The restoration of financial services, communication, and food assistance programs to Tigray;
- The ability for farmers to safely return to their land for the agricultural season and also the provision of assistance to the community through purchasing of seeds, cattle, oxen, and other tools;
- Unrestricted media access to all of Tigray; and
- Independent investigation into all starvation crimes in Tigray.


40. Anna. C. (2021, February 11). “We’ll be left without families”: Fear in Ethiopia’s Tigray. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/world-news-eritrea-ethiopia-kenya-84f0f72e2f08e542652b841d9ac09a3f8