

THE TIGRAY WAR & REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

(VOLUME 1)

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1. Forward

By Habte Hagos, Chair of Eritrea Focus

The tragic, brutal and entirely predictable war in Tigray has brought immense suffering to the Tigrayan people, exacerbated the long suffering of the Eritrean people and caused misery to families across the Horn of Africa. This report is an attempt to capture the complexities of the war and the events that led up to it. It includes detailed explanations of everything from the origins of the conflict and the looted treasures of the region to the atrocities committed against the Tigrayan people in general and women in particular. The authors have attempted to provide a dispassionate analysis of these dramatic events, from a variety of perspectives. Eritrea Focus encourages this diversity of opinions, without endorsing all the views contained in the report.

Although the atrocities we have chronicled are despicable and horrific, they should not come as a surprise. Almost every single atrocity inflicted on innocent Tigrayan civilians have been, and are being, committed against the people of Eritrean. Their heroic fight for independence, and against Ethiopian oppression, culminated in the liberation of Asmara in 1991 and our de-jure independence in 1993. Yet our hard-won freedom has been illusory: Eritrea has become a prison-state for its people. President Isaias Afwerki's regime is not constrained by a functioning constitution, a parliament or an effective judicial system. It is an absolute dictatorship by a leader who has never faced an election.

The 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices issued in March 2021 by the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor on Eritrea graphically described the atrocities committed by the Eritrean regime against its people¹:

“Significant human rights issues included: unlawful and arbitrary killings, forced disappearance; torture; and arbitrary detention, all committed by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison and detention center conditions; political prisoners; serious problems with judicial independence; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; the worst forms of restrictions on free expression and the press, including censorship and the existence of criminal libel laws; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe restrictions on religious freedom; widespread restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; restrictions on political participation; trafficking in persons; criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual conduct; and the worst forms of child labor”.

¹ [Eritrea - United States Department of State](#)

These atrocities, and others, have been chronicled annually since 2014 by the UN Human Rights Commission.² However, the international community has failed to use the information in these reports to take action against the Eritrean government; instead preferring to look the other way. This has left Eritrea's people to suffer in perpetuity, behind closed doors. These horrific abuses, first inflicted on the Eritrean people, are now being exported to Tigray. The inaction of the international community has made this possible.

This report was conceived on the day of the outbreak of the Tigray war in November 2020 and has been brought together over many months. It is being published as events are unfolding in the most dramatic fashion. The re-capture of Mekelle on Monday 28 June by Tigrayan forces, in what can only be described as a stunning victory for the Tigray Defence Forces, has transformed the situation. However, it has not been possible to capture all aspects of these transformative events in this version of the report. We aim to provide a fuller, updated version at a later date.

At this critical moment Eritrea Focus – as an Eritrean human rights organisation – calls for the following.

First: The immediate, unconditional and verifiable withdrawal of all Eritrean forces from Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia. Unless the Eritrean troops withdraw immediately, the unilateral ceasefire proclaimed by the Ethiopian government on 28 June will leave large areas of Tigray under occupation. This cannot be the basis for peace and will prolong the war in which thousands of Eritrean youth continue to perish.

Second: In the light of the famine now gripping Tigray, with 900,000 identified as close to starvation, it is vital that all bottlenecks and roadblocks on Ethiopian roads, preventing humanitarian assistance reaching the needy, are removed. The ports of Eritrea and Djibouti must also be open to shipping so that aid from the international community can flow through them. The aid route through Sudan (used during the 1984-85 famine) also needs to be re-opened. These measures are both vital and urgent.

Third: Those responsible for the atrocities committed during the war – especially those who systematically abused women and sent underage Eritrean children to war – must be held to account. This requires an internationally recognised, independent investigation and reference to international courts, if local courts prove incapable of prosecuting those involved. No-one – including the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea – should be granted immunity.

Fourth: All works of art and means of production, as well as personal belonging, looted by the occupying powers, must be returned. An international commission should be established to take stock of what has been stolen, and assist with the restoration of damaged works. A precedent for this exists in the commission

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AFRICARegion/Pages/ERIndex.aspx>

established at the end of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war of 1998 – 2000 to assess the responsibility for goods looted and homes and factories damaged on both sides of the border.

Fifth: It is vital that the good personal relations between Tigrayan and Eritrean communities, so terribly damaged by the current war, should be mended. This will take careful work by community and religious leaders. It is important to remember that both Eritreans and Tigrayans have suffered ruthless repression at the hands of President Isaias who wants to create hatred and division between our two peoples. We must not fall into this deceitful trap. There is immense goodwill between the Eritrean and Tigrayan diaspora. We should all work hard to build on this goodwill, and not allow events at home to divide or embitter us.

Sixth: As Eritreans we hold President Isaias Afwerki personally responsible for this war. His alliance with, and manipulation of, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed brought this unnecessary war upon our peoples and the region. President Isaias runs one of the world's most dictatorial regimes and he, and the tiny circle around him, must not escape from this tragedy unscathed. They must be brought to justice and we call on the international community to ensure that this takes place.

And finally, a message to Eritrean diaspora. Every conflict has a silver lining and the tragic Tigray war has shown the coming together of the Eritreans abroad in a way that has never been seen before. There are ongoing concerted discussions about forming an Eritrean Government in Exile to replace the unelected regime in Asmara. Others are working proactively to establish a representative group that can advocate for the rights of the Eritrean people and to engage with the international community. This is the time and there is the momentum for us all to rise to the challenge. It is an opportunity we must grasp.

Dictators have a limited shelf life and President Isaias is no different. It is essential that we prepare in unison for a smooth transition to a peaceful and democratic Eritrea.

By Prof. Kjetil Tronvoll, Director, Oslo Analytica

The war on Tigray is a political, social, economic and humanitarian disaster, instigated by unaccountable political leaders in Ethiopia and Eritrea. This report outlines the key elements of the crisis and its impact on the people of Tigray in particular, and Ethiopia and Eritrea in general. The report will serve as a useful tool for the international community to increase their understanding of the complexities of the war, its political background, and future implications.

Oslo Analytical has been engaged in policy research on the political developments in the Horn of Africa in general and in Ethiopia and Eritrea in particular for several years. Our key efforts have been concentrating on providing policy advice to

international actors on the radical political changes occurring in Ethiopia, especially since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. While praising the early reforms and diplomatic initiative towards Eritrea, we cautioned about the shift of policy directions in late 2018 and how it would impact stability and political trajectory of the country and undermine a genuine people-to-people peace process between the two countries. We have in particular addressed the so-called Ethiopian-Eritrean “peace process” and its political motivations and objectives, expressing a scepticism the genuine interest and the pursuit of peace by President Isaias Afwerki. Based on research in the Tigrayan-Eritrean borders, we unveiled a more sinister motive, which fed into our analysis of the new political dynamics.

Since the abolition of EPRDF and subsequent establishment of the Prosperity Party in December 2019, it became clear that political developments in Ethiopia would lead to an armed confrontation between the Federal government and the Tigray regional government unless conflict preventive measures were put in place. Oslo Analytica tried to mobilise the international community to undertake active conflict prevention diplomacy from early 2019, alas in vain.

Since the outbreak of war, we have been focusing on disseminating empirical based analysis on the war and its political and social impact in Tigray, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, with a three-fold objective: a) to support conflict prevention and mitigation; b) to alleviate the plight of the citizens of the Horn of Africa; and c) to end human rights violations and war crimes committed with impunity. We believe this report will greatly help in this endeavour.

2. Introduction: war, offensives and atrocities

By Martin Plaut³

2.1 Overview

The war in Tigray is now in its ninth month. This conflict, began as what the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed described as no more than a local “law enforcement operation” in November 2020. It soon escalated into a regional conflict involving Eritrean and Somali troops and Amhara special forces. The Tigrayans were rapidly driven from their capital, Mekelle and most of the region was soon in Ethiopian or Eritrean hands. Yet the Tigrayans fought on and in June 2021 transformed what had been a guerrilla war into a conventional conflict when they launched what they called “Operation Alula Aba Nega,” or simply “Operation Alula.”⁴ In just ten days, from 18 June to 28 June 2021 the Tigrayans succeeded in sweeping all before them, until they marched back into their regional capital, Mekelle. They found that the banks had been looted by the Ethiopian military just

³ Senior Research Fellow Kings’ College London and former Africa Editor, BBC World Service News

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Alula. This was named after the general who led Ethiopian forces in battles against Ethiopia’s enemies in the nineteenth century, and is considered the greatest military leader Tigray produced. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ras_Alula#Battle_of_Adwa

before they arrived and so had the UN offices. The ‘interim government’ appointed by the Ethiopians had packed up and fled. These events were followed by an Ethiopian offer of a unilateral ceasefire, but the offer was not well received by the Tigrayans, who pointed out that Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara troops remained on their soil.⁵ The United States responded by declaring that they would act if there were further atrocities, while re-iterating their call for Eritrean forces to leave and aid to be allowed to reach the needy without being held up at Ethiopian roadblocks.⁶ The shallowness of the Ethiopian ceasefire offer was soon revealed when the Ethiopian military declared that it could re-enter Mekelle within weeks, if necessary.⁷

Until these dramatic events unfolded the conflict was characterised by the following:

- Eritrean troops (despite initial denials by both governments) having direct involvement in the fighting since the start of the war in November 2020. The Ethiopian government then repeatedly stated that the Eritrean forces were about to leave⁸ (in response to calls for such a withdrawal from the international community) but this had, to date, not taken place. Rather, their troops were forced to leave large sections of Tigray by the Tigray Defence Forces.
- Somali troops were initially involved, as were regional Ethiopian militia, including the Amhara.
- As the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres pointed out, the conflict left Tigray “on the brink of famine” and that it will only get worse unless “funding is increased and humanitarian access is improved.”⁹ Mark Lowcock, the senior humanitarian emergency official at the UN, went further. He told a webinar on 10 June 2021 that 350,000 were already in a famine situation and that this figure was “higher than anywhere in the world.”¹⁰ Towards the end of June 2021 the head of USAID, Samantha Powers, put the figure at 900,000.¹¹ But getting aid to those in need is being held up by the Ethiopian and Eritrean military. As Samantha Powers said: “critical aid is being blocked and prevented from saving lives.”¹²
- The war has been characterised by extreme brutality against civilians. Thousands of women and girls have been sexually violated and raped, atrocities which appear to have been officially sanctioned. Civilians have been massacred and infrastructure, including historic and religious sites have been looted and destroyed. Religious leaders have been killed. Many thousands have been forced to flee to Sudan, while even larger numbers have been internally displaced in Tigray, or have sought sanctuary in other parts of Ethiopia.
- Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray, under the protection of UNHCR and the Ethiopian government, were attacked. Refugees were abused and killed with some forcibly returned to Eritrea from where they had fled.

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tigray-cease-fire-2745f0941cafcfa8fbc4c9f945f0925d>

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/ceasefire-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-says-many-soldiers-civilians-killed-tigray-conflict-2021-06-30/>

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2BR05O>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1402139073427382279?s=20>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/world/africa/ethiopia-famine-tigray.html?referringSource=articleShare>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/PowerUSAID/status/1408479282784047109?s=20>

¹² Ibid.

- The fighting has spilled across Ethiopia's frontiers, with clashes between Sudanese troops and Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces in a disputed border region – al-Fashaga.
- There are further regional tensions. The UAE was reported to have deployed drones against Tigrayan forces to support the Ethiopian and Eritrean war effort. The Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile has caused deep concern for both Egypt and Sudan, which have threatened to prevent it being filled. Ethiopian peacekeepers in Sudan and Somalia were withdrawn to fight in Tigray.
- While this conflict has taken place inside Tigray there has been unrest in the rest of Ethiopia. Protests and fighting have taken place in a number of regions. The Prime Minister is facing extensive resistance from a number of ethnic groups, including the Amhara, Oromo, Gumuz, Qemant and Somali.

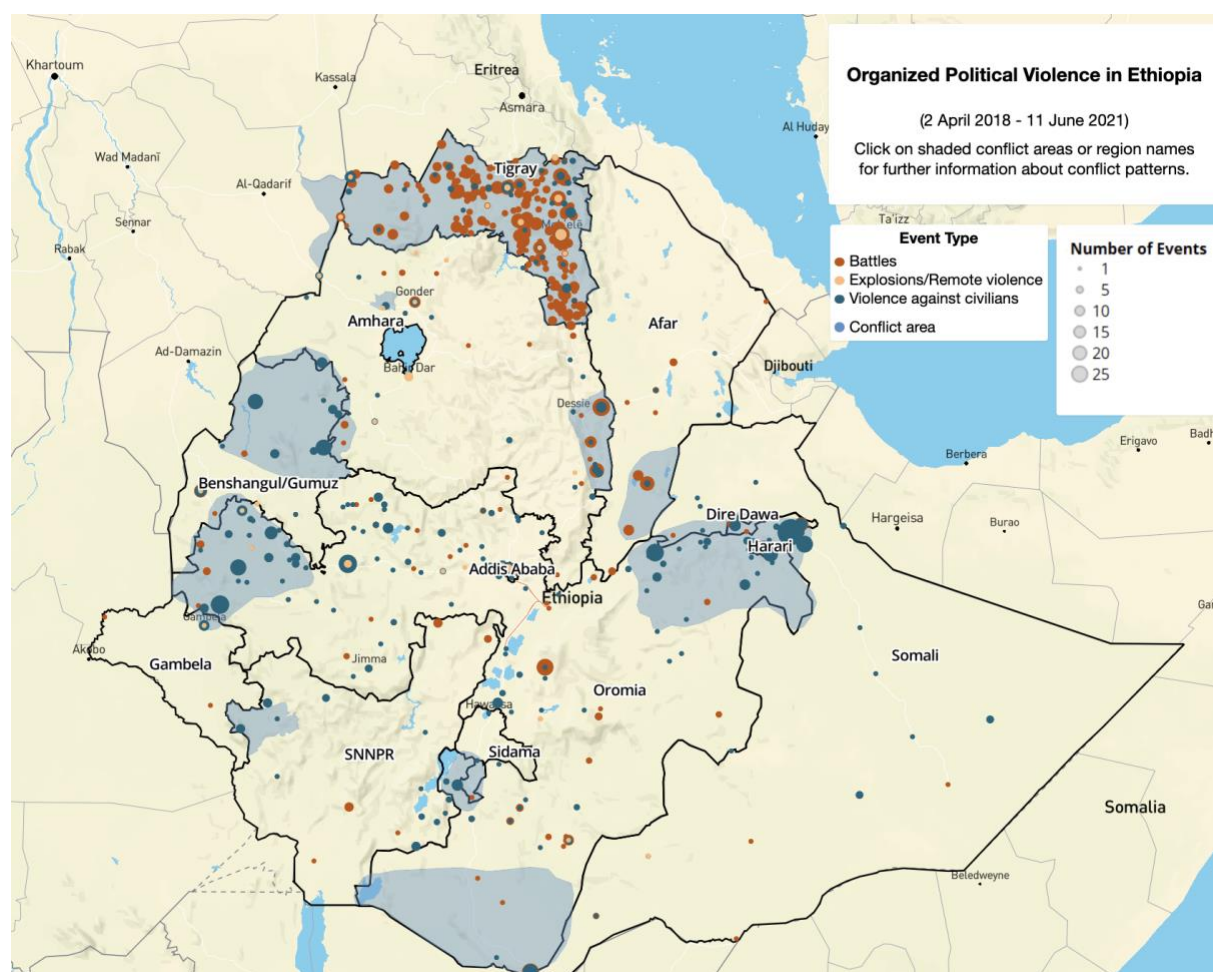


Figure 1 Source: Ethiopia Peace Observatory, 18 June 21, <https://epo.acleddata.com/>

The aim of this report is to bring together information about the Tigray war from different perspectives, drawing on the expertise of a number of scholars. They take a variety of views on events. This is inevitable, since the conflict is still ongoing and it is far too early to provide a definitive account of what has taken place. This report is an honest attempt to provide a balanced narrative, with references where these can be provided. Since some of the information is provided by writers who have been directly involved in the region, some of the authors have asked not to be identified.

We trust the reader will understand the parameters within which the report is written.

The international community has been involved with the crisis from the start. The African Union and the United Nations, together with the European Union and individual states, have attempted to halt the Tigray war, without success. The best the international interventions have achieved is a statement from Prime Minister Abiy that Eritrean troops will leave Tigray, at an unspecified date, and an agreement to hold an investigation into human rights abuses. As the prime minister said in a Tweet: "In our March 26, 2021 discussions with President Isaias Afwerki during my visit to Asmara, the government of Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces out of the Ethiopian border."¹³ Three months later this had yet to take place. There has been an increased access to some areas of Tigray for humanitarian agencies, but this is still limited.¹⁴ The EU has withdrawn some foreign aid and the United States has begun to impose sanctions against the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, but the full panoply of measures have yet to be deployed by the West to persuade Ethiopia to open negotiations with the Tigrayans.

The Tigrayans were driven from the towns and moved their forces into the hills and mountains soon after the war commenced. The fighting continued, destabilising Ethiopia and the wider region.¹⁵ Eritrean men, women and even children, have been forcibly conscripted and thrown into the conflict, where many are paying with their lives. The war is a cruel drain on the resources and population of Ethiopia and its neighbours. It is also – in the view of Jeffrey Feltman – a potential threat to the entire region. Feltman, a seasoned former senior U.S. and United Nations diplomat (who was subsequently appointed President Biden's special envoy to the Horn), told *Foreign Policy* in April 2021 that the conflict had the potential to spiral into a full-fledged regional crisis, citing a comparison to the war in Syria.¹⁶

"Look at what the collapse of Syria and the chaos of civil war has meant," said Feltman, citing the refugee crisis and its impact on Europe, as well as the rise of terrorist groups in the power vacuum from the collapse of a country that had a pre-war population of around 22 million people. "Ethiopia has 110 million people," he said. "If the tensions in Ethiopia would result in a widespread civil conflict that goes beyond Tigray, Syria will look like child's play by comparison."

2.2 Early attempts to halt the fighting

The outbreak of fighting in Tigray on the night of the 3/4 November 2020 followed months, if not years, of escalating tension. The Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders, Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki had planned some form of offensive against the Tigrayans, in association with the Somali leader, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed,

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/26/ethiopia-says-eritrea-has-agreed-to-withdraw-forces-from-tigray>

¹⁴ <https://www.unocha.org/story/daily-noon-briefing-highlights-afghanistan-ethiopia>

¹⁵ <https://www.justsecurity.org/76993/with-deliberate-famine-threatening-millions-tigray-demands-greater-action-from-the-us/>

¹⁶ <https://martinplaut.com/2021/04/27/u-s-africa-envoy-ethiopia-crisis-could-make-syria-look-like-childs-play/>

known as 'Farmaajo', since 2018.¹⁷ The Tigrayan leadership responded by blocking the removal of heavy weapons from their border with Eritrea and refusing to accept the replacement of Ethiopian commanders in their region.¹⁸ The conflict that erupted on 3/4 November brought a flurry of international statements of concern. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, "expressed his alarm over the reported armed clashes in the Tigray region" and "called for immediate measures to de-escalate tensions and ensure a peaceful resolution to the dispute."¹⁹ The very next day an influential group of American senior diplomats issued a warning about the regional implications of the conflict.²⁰ Signed by two former Assistant Secretaries of State for African Affairs (Chester Crocker and Jonnie Carson, plus former US ambassadors, it carried real weight and is worth quoting in some detail.

They warned that war could lead to a:

"fragmentation of Ethiopia" which in itself "would be the largest state collapse in modern history. Ethiopia is five times the size of pre-war Syria by population, and its breakdown would lead to mass interethnic and interreligious conflict; a dangerous vulnerability to exploitation by extremists; an acceleration of illicit trafficking, including of arms; and a humanitarian and security crisis at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East on a scale that would overshadow any existing conflict in the region, including Yemen. As Ethiopia is currently the leading Troop Contributing Country to the United Nations and the African Union peacekeeping missions in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, its collapse would also significantly impact the efforts by both to mitigate and resolve others conflicts in the Horn of Africa."

The potential threat to stability of the Horn was underlined by the UN Secretary General who stressed in a further statement that: "The stability of Ethiopia is important for the entire Horn of Africa region."²¹ The European Union's most senior Foreign Affairs official, Joseph Borrell, made similar remarks when he expressed concern at the risk to the integrity of Ethiopia and called for a de-escalation of the crisis.²² None of the statements appear to have had any impact on the conflict itself, which continued to escalate.

Rather, Mr Borrell's views, coming on top of the comments by the UN, apparently infuriated Prime Minister Abiy. In an official Tweet on 9 November 2020, he declared that: "Concerns that Ethiopia will descend into chaos are unfounded & a result of not understanding our context deeply. Our rule of law enforcement

¹⁷ <https://eritrea-focus.org/text-of-eritrea-ethiopia-and-somali-agreement/>

<https://eritreahub.org/what-are-the-war-aims-of-ethiopia-eritrea-and-somalia-in-tigray>

¹⁸ <https://eritreahub.org/war-clouds-gather-in-northern-ethiopia-tensions-between-tigray-eritrea-and-addis-ababa>

¹⁹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-11-04/statement-attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-%C2%A0the-situation-ethiopia%C2%A0%C2%A0>

²⁰ <https://www.usip.org/press/2020/11/statement-ethiopia-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea-arena>

²¹ <https://au.news.yahoo.com/ethiopia-pm-rejects-call-halt-offensive-152007389--spt.html>

²² [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/88375/Ethiopia: Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the latest developments](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/88375/Ethiopia%3A%20Statement%20by%20High%20Representative%20Vice-President%20Josep%20Borrell%20on%20the%20latest%20developments)

operation, as a sovereign state with the capacity to manage its own internal affairs, will wrap up soon by ending the prevailing impunity.”²³ The suggestion that the conflict would “wrapped up soon” proved wildly inaccurate. By April 2021, Abiy had to admit that far from the war being over, his forces were bogged down in ‘difficult and tiresome’ fighting on eight fronts.²⁴

As the war erupted the African Union attempted to intervene to end the conflict which was – after all - erupting just north of its headquarters in Addis Ababa. The chairman of the African Union Commission issued a statement appealing for “the immediate cessation of hostilities and calls on parties to respect human rights and ensure the protection of civilians,” while also urging talks.²⁵ Towards the end of November the African Union chairman, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, held talks with the Ethiopian President, Sahle-Work Zewde.²⁶ Together they hammered out a mediation plan. This involved the appointment of what were termed three African “distinguished Statespersons”: Joaquim Chissano, former President of the Republic of Mozambique; Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, former President of the Republic of Liberia; and Kgalema Motlanthe, former President of the Republic of South Africa. They were asked to act as Special Envoys of the African Union to help to mediate between “the parties to conflict” in Ethiopia.²⁷

Teferi Melesse Desta, the Ethiopian ambassador to Britain, told the BBC’s *World Tonight* on 20 November that his country had accepted the appointment of the three envoys to mediate in the crisis.²⁸ “The government of Ethiopia has accepted the initiative of the African Union chairperson, the President of South Africa, to appoint three special envoys to find a solution to the current situation in Ethiopia” Ambassador Teferi said. The international community moved swiftly to try to support the initiative. The UN Secretary General welcomed the appointment of the African Union envoys. A UN spokesman said that Mr Guterres “commends the Chairperson of the African Union, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, for this initiative and extends the full support of the United Nations. He also expresses his appreciation to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia for facilitating this initiative for peace.”²⁹

Unfortunately, this went against the stated policy of Prime Minister Abiy who had tweeted on 11 November that there would be no dialogue “until our efforts to ascertain [sic] the rule of law are achieved”.³⁰ Clearly furious, the Prime Minister said he would meet the former African presidents, but had no interest in allowing them

²³ <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1325724786547445760?s=20>

²⁴ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/04/04/Ethiopia-s-PM-Abiy-Ahmed-says-army-fighting-on-eight-fronts-including-Tigray>

²⁵ <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20201109/statement-auc-chairperson-situation-ethiopia>

²⁶ <https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-au-chair-appoints-three-special-envoys-to-help-mediate-ongoing-conflict-in-ethiopia-create-conditions-for-inclusive-dialogue/>

²⁷ <https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-au-chair-appoints-three-special-envoys-to-help-mediate-ongoing-conflict-in-ethiopia-create-conditions-for-inclusive-dialogue/>

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000phyd>

²⁹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-11-20/statement-attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-ethiopia>

³⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54900769>

to mediate in the conflict, or travel to Tigray.³¹ “We don't negotiate with criminals. We bring them to justice, not to the negotiating table,” the Prime Minister declared.³² Although Prime Minister Abiy met the three former presidents for stiff, but entirely pointless discussions on 27th November, the African Union mediation mission failed.³³ The last, best, chance for peace had been ended by Ethiopian government intransigence.

2.3 The war escalates

Air attacks began within days of the first clashes. Prime Minister Abiy announced that air strikes had taken place against what he described as military targets on 7th November.³⁴ At the same time the internet and telecommunications were cut. The army high command was re-structured to purge it of Tigrayan officers and anyone thought to be “unsound.”³⁵ Over the following weeks Tigrayans civilians were also ethnically targeted and forced out of their jobs, from airline staff with Ethiopian Airlines to taxi drivers in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian parliament voted to replace Tigray's elected government with an administration it would select.³⁶ The Ethiopian government subsequently officially declared the Tigray People's Liberation Front a ‘terrorist organisation.’³⁷

The Eritrean government joined the offensive against Tigray. This had apparently been in preparation for some time, in collaboration with Ethiopia. It was reported that Ethiopian troops had, over weeks, been flown into Asmara in the dead of night and then transported up to the front lines. Prime Minister Abiy told the Ethiopian parliament that Ethiopian troops who refused to join the Tigrayans after 4 October, had fled into Eritrea, where they were fed, clothed and re-armed.³⁸ These Ethiopian soldiers then participated in Eritrea's offensive against Tigray. On 10 November Reuters reported that the Tigray leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, accused Eritrea of crossing the border. “Since yesterday, the army of (Eritrean leader) Isaias (Afwerki) have crossed the country's boundary and invaded,” he said. “They were attacking via Humera using heavy arms.”³⁹ At the time the statement was greeted with some scepticism; it soon proved to be true.

Two other forces were involved in the attack on Tigray: Amhara Regional Special Forces and associated militia, as well as Somali troops. This will be explored below.

³¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-21/african-union-to-send-envoys-to-mediate-ethiopian-conflict>

³² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55023029>

³³ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict/african-envoys-due-to-meet-ethiopian-pm-as-war-ultimatum-expires-idUKKBN2870U2>

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54838282>

³⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54864868>

³⁶ <https://news.sky.com/story/ethiopias-government-votes-to-remove-leaders-in-tigray-as-unrest-moves-towards-civil-war-12126223>

³⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/1/ethiopia-to-designate-tplf-olf-shene-as-terror-groups>

³⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55295650>

³⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-eritrea-idUSKBN27Q1HT>

Much of the initial fighting was concentrated along Ethiopia's western border with Sudan, at the point where Eritrea and Ethiopia meet.⁴⁰ This was around the town of Humera which came under bombardment from Eritrean artillery from just over the border.⁴¹ The aim was clear: to attack Tigrayan forces from both North and South and to drive a wedge between them and the Sudanese border. Sudan was a conduit for supplies for the Tigrayans during the 1984-85 famine and throughout their long war that ended with their seizure of power in Addis Ababa in 1991. Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias, well aware of this fact, were determined to create a corridor along the Sudanese border, depriving the Tigrayans of potential support from Sudan, and efficiently cutting it off from the rest of the world.

The Prime minister made explicit his determination to prevent supplies entering Tigray from Sudan in an interview he gave on Fana television on 23 June 2021.⁴² Prime Minister Abiy explained that – in his view – the Tigrayans were using the present famine for their own ends, just as they had in the past.

“Until 1984, TPLF didn't have a single town and a single zone which it could claim as their stronghold. They had never conducted a decisive battle. However, when the famine struck in 1984/85 and there were calls for aid corridors through to Sudan to be opened. The organisations that wanted to see the fall of the Derge (the Ethiopian military government) entered the areas held by the TPLF. They brought with them strategic advice, ideas, finance, training and armaments. The same organisations are now putting forward the same ideas. Today they want to use the same tactics which they used 30 or 40 years ago. We will never allow this to happen.”

The Eritrean and Ethiopian forces attacking Humera were joined by Amhara militia, who were keen to regain lands they believed to have been taken from them by the Tigrayans under the 1995 Constitution. By March 2021 the Amhara had seized large areas of Tigray.⁴³ Tigrayans were driven out of the areas that had been captured, fleeing eastwards, leaving a large swathe of territory between most of the population in the centre of the region and Sudan.

Despite the prime minister's repeated assurances in early and mid-November that the war would soon be over there were few signs of this taking place. Rather, there was a swift advance on multiple fronts by Ethiopian forces and their allies. The towns of Axum and Sire fell.⁴⁴ The government declared it was in the “final phase” of an offensive in northern Tigray, with the capture of the town of Wukro, predicting that they would “control Mekelle in a few days”.⁴⁵ On 28th November the attack on the Tigray capital, Mekelle, began with a heavy bombardment.⁴⁶ Within hours of the

⁴⁰ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/end-of-ethiopia-conflict-coming-within-reach-says-pm/ar-BB1aRIPL>

⁴¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/ethiopia-unlawful-shelling-tigray-urban-areas>

⁴² <https://youtu.be/rmOMyRa72t8>

⁴³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-16/ethiopia-s-amhara-seize-disputed-territory-amid-tigray-conflict>

⁴⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54984056>

⁴⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict/african-envoys-due-to-meet-ethiopian-pm-as-war-ultimatum-expires-idUKKBN2870U2?edition-redirect=uk>

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55111061>

assault the Ethiopian army chief of staff, General Berhanu Julia, said the army had captured the city. “Our hero army is fully in control of Mekelle,” the general declared.⁴⁷ While the city had fallen, the Tigrayan administration had ordered their forces to withdraw before the attack. An eyewitness explained what took place.⁴⁸

“After the bombing came the troops. The city was surrounded. The first we knew was that elders and priests called local meetings in district halls. They told the people that the TPLF had left confidential messages with them. The leadership explained that they were pulling out of Mekelle to prevent it from being destroyed in fighting. They left for the mountains to continue the struggle. I understand why they did this, but it was a terrible moment. I felt helpless. Vulnerable. Alone. Some people panicked and left the city.”

With the regional capital and most major cities in the hands of Prime Minister Abiy’s forces, he felt able to claim victory: federal troops controlled Mekelle, a major development in a three-week-old war which was – in his view – effectively over.⁴⁹ He claimed that Mekelle had fallen and that “not a single civilian was killed” during the operation.⁵⁰ “I am pleased to share that we have completed and ceased the military operations in the Tigray region,” the prime minister said in a Tweet.⁵¹

This version of events was challenged by the Tigrayan leader, Debretsion Gebremichael. On 26 November Reuters reported receiving a message from Debretsion in which he said that his forces were continuing to fight, with clashes taking place near Mekelle.⁵² Perhaps to underline this message, the Tigrayans unleashed rocket attacks against the Eritrean capital, Asmara. As ever, this was not reported by official Eritrean government sources, but the US embassy put out an alert to its citizens in the country.⁵³ “At about 10:13pm on November 28 there were six explosions in Asmara. The Embassy again advises all U.S. Citizens in Eritrea to continue to exercise caution, remain in their homes (when not at work), conduct only essential travel, and to remain situationally aware of the ongoing conflict in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia. US Citizens not in country should avoid travel to Eritrea.” This was not the first time the Tigrayans had used rocket attacks. The cities of Bahir Dar and Gondar in the Amhara region were attacked on 13 November.⁵⁴ The rocket attacks did not continue. Perhaps the Tigrayans ran out of long-range missiles; perhaps their rocket launchers were destroyed from the air by jets or drones. Whatever the reason, they do not appear to have played a central role in the war.

⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/654684251716987/posts/1033485603836848/>

⁴⁸ <https://eritreahub.org/gideys-story>

⁴⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict/ethiopian-military-operation-in-tigray-is-complete-prime-minister-says-idUSKBN28809E>

⁵⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56229256>

⁵¹ <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1332740110039846914?s=20>

⁵² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict/leader-of-ethiopias-tigrayan-forces-says-he-is-fighting-near-mekelle-idUSKBN28A0LD>

⁵³ <https://er.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-asmara-eritrea-11-28-2020/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopian-cities-hit-by-rockets-from-tigray-forces/a-55599105>

The Tigrayans had adopted the tactics they had used throughout their long war against the Ethiopia government that ended with the TPLF seizing Addis Ababa in 1991: they retreated into the hills and mountains. Ethiopia was – once more – beset by a guerrilla war, of an intensity previously witnessed when the authorities last fought the Tigrayans.

3. Ethiopia at war

By Antony Shaw⁵⁵

3.5 The Federal Government v Tigray Regional State

Introduction

On November 4, 2020, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered federal armed forces, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), into action to carry out a "law enforcement operation" in Tigray.⁵⁶ His statement followed a number of overnight attacks by Tigray Regional Special Forces and militia on ENDF bases and offices, in Mekelle, the capital of the region and headquarters of the Northern Command of the ENDF. There were similar confrontations in other parts of Tigray, some close to the border with Eritrea where the ENDF had major concentrations of troops and equipment.⁵⁷ Surprisingly, the ENDF was taken unawares, Prime Minister Abiy said later. He said units were forced to flee into Eritrea without clothes or equipment, while others were surrounded with soldiers killed, some while sleeping.⁵⁸ There are two very different explanations of the actual outbreak of war that appear equally unlikely. The first is the story that was offered by the Tigrayan authorities.

The Tigray Regional Government originally claimed that the government started the conflict, though even then there was more than one version of what actually happened. One account claimed there had been an unsuccessful Federal government commando raid on Mekelle in the early hours of November 4 to try and seize the Tigrayan political leadership believed to be meeting at the Planet Hotel.⁵⁹ The commandos found the hotel empty and then retreated. An alternative account

⁵⁵ A long-term consultant in Addis Ababa

⁵⁶ "TPLF attacks Ethiopian national Defence Forces Base in Tigray". Office of the Prime Minister, 4.11.2020. <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/tplf-attacks-ethiopian-national-defense-forces-base-in-tigray/>

⁵⁷ Subsequently claimed to be a hundred in a report compiled by the Attorney-General's Office, published February 2021. <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/02/06/attorney-general-office-gives-updates-on-probe-into-tplf-officials/>

⁵⁸ Prime Minister Abiy's address to Parliament 30.11.2020. <https://www.pmo.gov.et/media/other/a04bae2d-2da2-483d-a9e3-74d441088401.pdf>. (Amharic) <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/22/the-causes-and-course-of-the-tigray-conflict-according-to-abi-ahmed/>. (English translation) An earlier statement (Prime Minister's Office (PMO) 14.11.2020) referred to the "premeditated and treasonous act" in which the TPLF ordered "ethnic Tigrayan members of the Northern Command, whose loyalties lay with the TPLF and its murderous mission, to open fire on their comrades from within, causing unimaginable human suffering, demonstrating extreme cruelty, and showing unprecedented betrayal." Abiy gave no numbers for those killed at the time, but in a statement in December (PMO 24.12.2020) he referred to the TPLF as massacring in cold blood "hundreds of unarmed Ethiopian soldiers of non-Tigrayan origin". The ENDF has given no figure of those killed on November 3-4.

⁵⁹ www.aigaforum.com/article2020/Tigrai-vs-Abiy-war-setting-the-record.htm

suggested the commandos had arrived in the guise of security forces guarding a transfer of banknotes, airlifted to Mekelle in two helicopters and an Antonov from Bahir Dar, again without finding their target. In these versions, it appears there was no fighting in Mekelle, but TPLF forces subsequently took over the ENDF base near Mekelle airport through which the commandos had come, where there was some fighting.

In fact, given the situation at the time, neither version seems plausible. It would be highly improbable that a commando unit would be able to land at Mekelle airport, drive into the city, take over a hotel and withdraw without conflict.

A different version of events suggests the Tigrayan government did not really expect conflict to break out until October, despite a long series of threatening moves by Abiy over several months, and they had made few preparations. When confrontation appeared inevitable, the Tigrayan leaders held talks with the Northern Command headquarters in Mekelle, to ask for assistance or at the least for weapons and logistical support, including artillery and rockets. They claimed Abiy had mobilized ENDF units and the Amhara militia and come to an agreement with Eritrea to attack Tigray. Agreement was reached allowing the Tigrayans to remove weapons but most of troops at the base refused to fight for Tigray. They then retired to Mekelle University campus to be guarded, housed and fed. Later an agreement was reached with the International Committee of the Red Cross, under which 1,300 were sent to Gondar and Addis Ababa.

In this version, when the Tigrayans arrived at the base to collect the promised weapons, some of the troops resisted and as a result fighting broke out. In the meantime, Tigrayan units had approached other ENDF bases throughout the region. The ENDF units were offered the alternatives of surrender or joining to fight for Tigray. Several thousand, including many of the Tigrayan troops in the Northern Command, took the latter option; but at least as many appear to have surrendered to be held prisoners.⁶⁰ In a number of cases, fighting broke out, for example, at Adigrat, Dansha and Serto, and some troops were forced to retreat into Eritrea.

This account appeared to be broadly confirmed a couple of weeks later when a TPLF official, Sekou Toure Getachew, admitted that the TPLF had taken what he described as a pre-emptive action, attacking units of the Northern Command in advance of a Federal Government assault on the region planned for the next day.⁶¹ The timing of this, the day after the controversial 2020 US election, suggests the Federal government itself may indeed have been planning an attack to coincide with this distraction for the international community. Certainly, it had already moved some

⁶⁰ After the Federal forces entered Mekelle on November 28, General Berhanu Julia, the Chief of Staff, said 7,000 members of the Northern Command held as hostages by the TPLF had been freed.

⁶¹ Sekou Toure's status has been questioned and his account was later denied by a senior TPLF official, spokesperson, Getachew Reda. "Interview given by freedom fighter Getachew Reda regarding current Issues", TMH, 27/04/21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1aRsfuBJHo>

ENDF units into a position to launch an immediate response on November 4, as well as already mobilizing Amhara regional Special Forces at the border with Tigray.⁶²

If the narrative provided by the Tigrayans is implausible, then so is that offered by the Ethiopian authorities. This portrays the Ethiopian government as having been taken completely by surprise by the attack on the Northern Command on November 4. The evidence points in the other direction. There are solid indications that Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias spent many months working on plans to resolve their problems with the TPLF, or at least to reduce its influence inside Ethiopia and along the border with Eritrea. After Prime Minister Abiy went on his historic visit to Asmara on 8 July 2018 President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy made no fewer than nine visits to each other's capitals, or visited foreign capitals together prior to the outbreak of war in Tigray.⁶³ This cementing of relations was enhanced by further mutual visits by Ethiopian and Eritrean ministers and senior officials. A summit meeting was held in Asmara on 27 January 2020, at which the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders were joined by the Somali President, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo.⁶⁴ A statement was issued after the meeting in which the three leaders pledged to face common security threats together.⁶⁵ When the war in Tigray erupted, troops from all three countries would be involved. The final piece of the puzzle is offered by the visits made just prior to the Tigray war by President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy. The Ethiopian leader becomes the first foreign head of state to visit Eritrea's main training base at Sawa on 18 July 2020 and was photographed inspecting troops and military equipment.⁶⁶ This was followed by President Isaias' visit to the Ethiopian air force base at Bishoftu on 12 October.⁶⁷ This pattern of inspection of military facilities just prior to the Tigray war, together with the summit with Somalia, strongly suggests that the leaders were making preparations to confront and – if necessary – eliminate the threat they perceived to emanate from Tigray.

If this interpretation is accurate then the official versions of events provided by both the Tigrayan and the Ethiopian and Eritrean sides of the conflict need to be treated with scepticism.

On 28 November, just over three weeks after the outbreak of war, Federal troops advanced to seize the regional capital, Mekelle. Rather than fight street by street the TPLF leadership and its forces chose to withdraw, taking to the countryside to continue the conflict. Prime Minister Abiy felt he could declare his 'law enforcement operation' had been a success. He wrote on his Twitter account: "I am pleased to share that we have completed and ceased the military operations in the Tigray

⁶² Amhara Police Commissioner Abere Adamu said later that the Amhara region authorities and police had been fully aware of the TPLF's preparations, and the Amhara regional authorities "had deployed forces all along our borders from east to west. The war started after we have already completed our preparations." <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-police-chief-reveals-how-regions-police-force-guided-federal-steel-clad-mechanized-forces-to-join-war-in-tigray/>

⁶³ <https://eritreahub.org/timeline-how-the-president-isaias-prime-minister-abiy-relationship-developed>

⁶⁴ <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/01/27/somalia-ethiopia-and-eritrea-pledge-joint-anti-terror-war/>

⁶⁵ <https://villasomalia.gov.so/en/heads-of-state-and-government-meeting-between-eritrea-ethiopia-and-somalia-joint-communicue/>

⁶⁶ <https://eritreahub.org/is-isaias-looking-for-a-final-confrontation-with-his-tigrayan-enemies>

⁶⁷ <https://shabait.com/2020/10/15/president-isaias-returns-home-concluding-working-visit-to-ethiopia/>

region. Our focus now will be on rebuilding the region and providing humanitarian assistance while Federal Police apprehend the TPLF clique.”⁶⁸

His belief that military operations in Tigray had been “completed and ceased”, rapidly looked hollow. With most of the TPLF leadership remaining at large, and the launch of guerrilla war, there were a steadily increasing number of claims of continued fighting, of massacres and attacks on civilians, and of looting as well as attacks on churches and mosques being carried out by both Federal Government and Eritrean troops. The war has continued with a series of confrontation that ranged from skirmishes to full scale battles.

The government has complained about the reports of continuous fighting claiming that these have exaggerated the humanitarian situation in the region, the human rights abuses committed against the local population in Tigray. The presence of Eritrea troops in Tigray was repeatedly denied as fake news. As the BBC reported on 27 January 2021: “Both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments deny that Eritrean forces are in Tigray, which borders Eritrea.”⁶⁹ It was only on 23 March 2021 that Abiy only very reluctantly and belatedly admitted in a speech to Parliament that there were indeed Eritrean troops in Tigray. He said that he had spoken to Eritrean officials about the allegations of atrocities, following a growing number of accusations of abuse.⁷⁰ He told MPs: “After the Eritrean army crossed the border and was operating in Ethiopia, any damage it did to our people was unacceptable”, adding, “Regardless of the TPLF propaganda of exaggeration, any soldier responsible for raping our women and looting communities in the region will be held accountable as their mission is to protect.”⁷¹

Whatever the original intention of Abiy and the Federal government may have been, the operation in Tigray region rapidly assumed a much larger dimension than mere ‘law enforcement’. With the involvement of Eritrea, and to a lesser extent Somalia, it became an international conflict. The international aspect has been reinforced by the associated tension and clashes along the Sudan-Ethiopian border. Bloomberg reported on 24 March 2021 the UN as saying that Eritrean forces were participating in the clash between Ethiopian and Sudanese forces.⁷² “The conflict along the border

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1332740110039846914?s=20>

⁶⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55825560>

⁷⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2BF1NT>

⁷¹ It is worth noting that the Government of Eritrea has made virtually no statement on its involvement or the activities of its troops in Tigray. The first admission of their presence came in a letter from Eritrea’s Ambassador to the UN, Ambassador Sophia Tesfamariam, to the President of UNSC (16.4.2021) complaining about statements made on Tigray by the US Permanent Representative to the UN, and by OCHA, in a closed UNSC Session. <https://shabait.com/2021/04/16/letter-of-eritreas-ambassador-to-the-un-to-current-president-of-uns/>. They had made false allegations about Eritrean troops: “The allegations of rape and other crimes lodged against Eritrean soldiers is not just outrageous, but also a vicious attack on the culture and history of our people”, adding that “Eritrea and Ethiopia have agreed, at the highest levels, to embark on the withdrawal of Eritrean forces and the simultaneous redeployment of Ethiopian contingents along the international boundary”. Ambassador Sophia outlined the official reason for the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray, that the TPLF had “unleashed a massive, pre-emptive attack on all the contingents of the entire Ethiopian Northern Command. The purpose of this “blitzkrieg” was to neutralize Ethiopia’s largest army contingent, confiscate its weaponry (80% of the total arsenal of the DF) and seize power in Ethiopia through violence and subsequently invade Eritrea.” There is, in fact, no evidence of the TPLF either planning to seize power in Ethiopia nor to invade Eritrea. Interestingly, however, Ambassador Sophia did refer to TPLF actions as “pre-emptive”, an apparent admission that Ethiopia and Eritrea had been planning an attack.

⁷² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-24/eritrea-forces-deployed-in-disputed-sudan-ethiopia-area-un-says>

between Sudan and Ethiopia remains active, with Sudanese Armed Forces and Ethiopian — including Amhara militias — and Eritrean forces deployed around Barkhat settlement in Greater Fashaga and clashes reported since early March,’ the UN said in its latest situation report on Ethiopia.” It is also a major humanitarian disaster, threatening the very survival of the region’s population and giving rise to accusations that Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias have decided to destroy both the TPLF and even Tigray itself.⁷³

From the outset of the fighting, the ‘law enforcement operation’, involved substantial numbers of Federal Government troops, Amhara Special Forces and militia and the support of much of the Eritrean army, apparently aiming for the destruction of the TPLF and apparently careless of any loss of life that might occur. They confronted tens of thousands of Tigrayan Special forces and militia and some ENDF soldiers and officers from Tigray, who had gone over to the Tigrayan side. Thousands were forced to flee as refugees into Sudan, and hundreds of thousands more have been internally displaced. Accusations and counter-accusations of human rights abuse and of violations of the rules of war, have filled social media platforms, and the usual difficulty of evaluating claims in war situations was increased by the Federal Government’s blanket refusal to allow outsiders any access to the region and the cutting of all Internet and other communication links in Tigray. This, of course, had the effect of increasing international concern about the activities of both sides and more particularly of the Amhara and Tigray Special Forces and militia as well as of the Federal forces and even more of the Eritrean troops.

The Federal government’s ban on external and independent access to Tigray, both journalistic and humanitarian, was partially lifted in late February as a result of the increasing evidence of abuse, as Tigrayan leaders managed to provide reports to the outside world.⁷⁴ The ban had been doing the Federal government no favours and the effect on the reputation of Prime Minister Abiy will be long lasting. It also had the result of producing two, diametrically opposed, narratives, contrasting ‘truths’, very different accounts of why, and how, conflict erupted at the beginning of November, and of what has been happening since. These narratives not only cover the war, they also amount to two very different interpretations of events since Prime Minister Abiy came to power in April 2018 and of the years of TPLF hegemonic control of Ethiopia’s ruling coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Federal Government prior to 2018, and even more of where blame lies for the descent into the catastrophic situation in Tigray. Neither can be accepted as totally plausible or accurate.

The absence of so much external and independent information, the refusal of the Federal government to allow independent access into Tigray, and the destruction of so much in Tigray, a point of concern in itself, means much of the story depends upon balance of probabilities not certainties. Surviving TPLF leaders have seldom

⁷³ <https://www.theafricareport.com/62232/the-war-in-tigray-abiy-isaias-and-the-amhara-elite/>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55877939>

⁷⁴ <https://eritreahub.org/prime-minister-abiy-announces-access-to-tigray-for-seven-international-media-organisations-including-bbc-reuters-al-jazeera>

been able to give their version of events since early November; the Eritrean government apparently continues to believe it can outlast any reports of killing, looting and destruction, and has remained silent as usual; the Ethiopian government has offered minimal details of its 'law enforcement operation'. These have, however, included Prime Minister Abiy's somewhat premature announcement of a successful conclusion to the operation on November 28, along with his knowingly inaccurate assertion that no single civilian had died in the capture of Tigray's towns and cities. A growing number of detailed reports of human rights abuse, killings of the local population and the destruction caused by Ethiopia and Eritrean troops have been filtering out of the region since the end of November, despite all the efforts of Federal Government. Similarly, claims of continued TPLF military action have continued to appear, as has the evidence of maltreatment of civilians by refugees reaching Sudan, and the refoulement of Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea. The Federal government, in turn, has been steadily reinforcing its own narrative with reports of investigations claiming additional evidence of TPLF criminal and treasonable activities both before and after the outbreak of hostilities.

The contradictions in the competing narratives extend to the whole period since the TPLF lost power in early 2018, and indeed cover its activities since 1991 when it ousted the military regime of the Derg. A central element in Abiy's account of how and why he became Prime Minister has been his increasing enthusiasm to blame the TPLF exclusively for all the problems of the EPRDF, for which, of course, he himself worked for so long, as a soldier, in security, as a minister and then as an Oromo politician. In fact, however, behind all the arguments and claims lies a long history of conflict and disagreements over power and authority in Ethiopia as well as over the policies and legacy of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).⁷⁵

Perhaps we should at this point, underline that what we hope to do here is to provide a third, realistic, narrative, producing as accurate an account as possible of events, steering a course between the Scylla of government claims and propaganda and the Charybdis of TPLF allegations and counter-claims, and avoiding the exaggerations, distortions and lies of social media, fake news, mis-information and hate speech produced by both sides and their supporters.

Background

The onset of the conflict in November 2020 was hardly a surprise. Indeed, expectations of open conflict had grown steadily ever since Prime Minister Abiy formally took office on 2 April 2018, and relations between the TPLF leadership and the Federal government in Addis Ababa began to deteriorate. The choice of Abiy as leader of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) saw Abiy sworn in as Prime Minister after the resignation of his predecessor,

⁷⁵ The EPRDF, replaced by a single national Prosperity Party in December 2019) was the ruling coalition in Ethiopia from 1991. It was made up of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (later the Oromo Democratic Party), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (later the Amhara Democratic Party), and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement.

Hailemariam Dessalegn in February 2018. More significantly, it indicated an end to the TPLF domination of the EPRDF and of the control it had exercised over the Federal, and state, governments, for 27 years. Indeed, there were signs that the writing was on the wall since the outbreak of widespread demonstrations in 2015.⁷⁶ Ethiopians were increasingly fed up with deep seated corruption and failures of governance. It became clear that the public was prepared to resist the senior, and largely Tigrayan, levels of the EPRDF government, which had become infected by their immunity in power.

The TPLF leadership was proud of its revolution, of the effort and of the sacrifices it had made to overthrow the military regime of the Derg in 1991. They had built strong support in Tigray during, and after, the struggle. They had also produced a solution for the distribution of power in the rest of Ethiopia. Starting as an ethno-nationalist organization, long before the collapse of the Derg, the TPLF had realized the need to find another way of dealing with Ethiopia's multiple ethnic problems. Its answer was a federation, and rather more controversially, an ethnic federation. The logic of this seemed reasonable in 1991– there were a number of ethnically based guerrilla groups operating across Ethiopia, and the country was awash with arms as the Derg's 500,000 strong army collapsed. The TPLF may have been the leading element in ousting the Derg in Ethiopia but it owed much to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front's successes in Eritrea and for the help the EPLF provided in capturing Addis Ababa.⁷⁷ The Tigrayans were also supported by the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) later the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM),⁷⁸ and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)⁷⁹ in Ethiopia. Other armed ethnic opposition movements were also found at various times among the Afar, in Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Sidama and the Somali regions. Indeed, much of the opposition to the Derg (and to the previous imperial regime) came from minority nationalities which believed correctly that they had been marginalized and largely ignored in terms of power, development, culture and language within the centralized imperial and military structures of governance.

On achieving power in Addis Ababa, the TPLF, well aware of the minority status of Tigrayans (only 7% of the population)⁸⁰, used the EPRDF as the vehicle for control. It added the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (later the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) in 1992 to incorporate 56 'nations, nationalities and peoples' from the southern part of the country. In theory, the Front provided an equality of authority between its four elements; in practice, the TPLF remained very much in charge. Its long-time chair Meles Zenawi

⁷⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/11/ethiopia-protests-master-plan-addis-ababa-students>

⁷⁷ <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-newsbrief/international-community-struggles-address-ethiopian-conflict>

⁷⁸ The EPDM began as an offshoot of the pan-Ethiopian Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Opposed to the Derg, one faction had moved to Tigray to open guerrilla operations. In competition with the TPLF, it was defeated and driven out of Tigray in 1977. Some elements survived to set up the EPDM and open their own armed struggle among the Amhara in 1982. It joined with the TPLF to set up the EPRDF in 1989, and formally marked its transition from a pan-Ethiopian movement to an ethnic organization in 1994 when it changed its name to the ANDM.

⁷⁹ TPLF relations with the OLF deteriorated towards the end of the struggle against the Derg, and the TPLF created another Oromo organization, the OPDO, out of its Oromo prisoners of war, to provide the Oromo element in the EPRDF in 1990.

⁸⁰ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/#people-and-society>

(President 1991-1995; Prime Minister 1995-2012) developed a steadily increasing autocratic streak, particularly after he defeated an attempt to oust him in 2001.

Meles' own personal authoritarianism was reflected in the way in which the TPLF controlled the EPRDF, producing an elite to dominate governance and administration, business and finance, and, in particular, military and security concerns.⁸¹ Never quite so pervasive as its critics claimed, and gradually losing some of its control in all these spheres after 2012, significant elements of the TPLF nevertheless became involved in mis-governance. This included tax evasion, embezzlement, money laundering and all the other usual aspects of rent-seeking activities available in a developmental state suffering from corruption. Identified later by Prime Minister Abiy as essentially a Tigrayan fault, this was hardly the case.⁸² During the 2000s, suspicion of corruption, both of power and of money, spread across all levels of the EPRDF and indeed of the associate regional ruling parties, in the Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harar and Somali regional states. Indeed, it could be said to transcend ethnicity and involve all regional governments as well as the Federal administration. When rumour became impossible to ignore, a minister might find himself (gender was hardly a concern prior to 2018) posted abroad as an ambassador despite protests from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Another alternative was to retire gracefully into a business advisory role. Any faults, real or imaginary, remained hidden behind the government's traditional walls of secrecy.

Meles and some TPLF leaders railed against such perversion of the revolution, but demonstrated all-too-common undemocratic answers to criticism: jailing opposition party leaders, journalists and others, and responding violently to any demonstrations of opposition as in the aftermath of the controversial, and genuinely contested, 2005 elections.⁸³ There was some awareness of the need for change. In June 2009, at Meles' insistence, the Front adopted *Metekakat*, his plan to provide for a new generation of leaders in three phases.⁸⁴ Meles himself was due to leave in the third and final stage by 2015. The first phase involved the resignation of a third of the EPRDF's Executive Committee drawn from all four organizations. The reality of the changes was questioned because those resigning largely moved from executive to advisory roles with Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin, for example, being appointed Ambassador to China. Nevertheless, Meles, at least, intended the process to be real, if only as an excuse to remove of a number of people from the party.⁸⁵ The second stage of this transition was due in 2012, but the process abruptly came to a halt when Meles unexpectedly died in August 2012.⁸⁶

The commitment of the TPLF, and therefore of the EPRDF, to an ethnic-driven federalism was in part driven by the circumstances of the struggle against the Derg,

⁸¹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08aea40f0b64974000850/20110822-appp-rr02-rethinking-business-politics-in-ethiopia-by-sarah-vaughan-mesfin-gebremichael-august-2011.pdf>

⁸² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/15/world/africa/ethiopia-abiy-tigray.html>

⁸³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10150894>

⁸⁴ <https://hornaffairs.com/2013/04/05/ethiopia-eprdf-leadership-organs-election/>

⁸⁵ Personal communication, 2002

⁸⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/21/ethiopia-prime-minister-zenawi-dies>

but it also reflected the TPLF's own interest and aims for establishing Tigray's future role in Ethiopia, and its ideological view of the place of the Amhara in Ethiopian history. This included awareness of the historic competition between the Amhara and Tigrayans for control of the core Abyssinian highland empire. For all its Marxist credentials its commitment to ethnic nationalism meant that the TPLF also looked back to the reign of the Tigrean Emperor Yohannes IV in the late 19th century, the last time Tigray had been dominant. Early on in its own existence, in 1976, the TPLF produced a position paper exploring the possibilities of an independent, even a greater Tigray, including the Tigrayan-speaking areas of what later became Eritrea.⁸⁷ It was considered seriously, but almost immediately rejected for practical, political and ideological reasons. Although it has been frequently used as a slur since 2018, it is only now that it appears to be gaining traction again in response to the treatment of Tigray and Tigrayans by Abiy.

Whether the TPLF ever intended to create genuine federal structures, ethnic, linguistic or otherwise, may be an open question,⁸⁸ but certainly, despite having been instrumental in instituting a federal structure, the TPLF failed to implement the necessary structures for its growth. Ethnic, or rather linguistic federalism, however, had consequences, as might have been expected, most notably a substantial increase in ethno-nationalism with the potential to disrupt the unity of the state despite the emphasis laid on 'unity in diversity'. Problems were exacerbated by the creation of the 'developmental state' which required a vanguard party, in this case a coalition controlled by the TPLF. Almost inevitably, this led to a widespread belief that the TPLF favoured state aid and investment for their home region over the rest of the country.⁸⁹ Intended to moderate and control ethno-nationalism, the EPRDF, in fact, encouraged it despite Meles' own desire to turn the Front into a single national party.⁹⁰ The EPRDF Central Committee set up a sub-committee to study this back in 2008 but the four parties failed to agree on possible modalities. Significantly, they also refused to consider incorporating the ruling parties of the smaller regional states. These were also, in effect, creations of the TPLF but the EPRDF consistently refused to accept they had reached a sufficient stage of political maturity to join the EPRDF as equal partners.

This underlined the major failure of the TPLF and its creation, the EPRDF: it proved unable to resolve the "question of nationalities in Ethiopia"⁹¹ Its attempt, ethnic, or more accurately linguistic, federalism, was never seriously applied with the TPLF operating a centralised authoritarianism in which repression became a major issue. This failure outweighed the quite genuine achievements of the government. Indeed, despite the Federal Government's virulent propaganda after April 2018, the record of the EPRDF prior to 2018 was far from poor. Its 'developmental state' oversaw

⁸⁷ The idea goes back to the Italian East African imperial governorates briefly established under Italian control in 1935-41. There were six of these, including an enlarged Eritrea, for Tigrayans and Afars, and a greatly enlarged Somalia for all Somalis, though the Amhara and Oromos were divided between the four governorates which made up the rest of Ethiopia.

⁸⁸ Comments from TPLF leaders in the first half of the 1990s suggest it was largely intended to control suspected Amhara efforts to reverse the EPRDF takeover, rather than from any genuine commitment to democratic forms *per se*.

⁸⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dfid-research-rethinking-business-and-politics-in-ethiopia-the-role-of-effort-the-endowment-fund-for-the-rehabilitation-of-tigray>

⁹⁰ Personal communication, 2002.

⁹¹ Walleligne Mekonnen 17.11.1969. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/nationalities.pdf>

some 15 years of double-digit economic growth, an impressive and substantial fall in poverty, and significant development in infrastructure, health and education across the country. Life expectancy between 1991 and 2018 rose from 40 to 65. By 2019 the World Bank assessed that this had risen to 67 – a remarkable achievement.⁹² Donors found the EPRDF used aid effectively and welcomed its state-led developments in infrastructure and social services. It provided stability, if at a price, and supported international and regional peace-keeping. Nevertheless, despite the EPRDF's insistence that it was aiming for a 'democratic developmental state', its repressive and authoritarian approach to criticism, coupled with increasing perceptions of Tigrayan dominance and escalating failures of governance and corruption, provided for a steady build-up of opposition.

Overall, the operation of the federal state as implemented under the 1995 Constitution by the TPLF reinforced its authoritarianism, negating any efforts at real change or (re)-negotiation of power or even any improved relationship between the Federal government and the state administrations. At the same time, it offered no alternatives to the growing ethnic mobilization that the constitution inevitably encouraged in the states or to its increasingly vocal intellectual support. Coupled with the merging of party and state functions and administration within the centralized ethnic federal state, this became a major cause of increased ethnic-based violence, largely driven by land and territorial issues, particularly after 2015.

Any changes in personnel at the head of the EPRDF, or of the TPLF in 2010 and 2012, did nothing to moderate the growth of the TPLF into a propertied urban elite distant from its own roots among the Tigrayan peasantry. Nor did it make much effort to deal with the growth of popular unrest after 2015, largely in Oromia and Amhara regions, other than responding by violence, first instituting a State of Emergency in October 2016. This provided for an extensive list of measures, including bans on social media, on accessing the external ESAT and Oromia Media Network outlets, on participating in or organizing unauthorized protests, and on opposition groups issuing statements to the press. Diplomatic travel outside Addis Ababa was limited and security forces given considerably greater powers to search or use force. Meles' successor as Prime Minister, Hailemariam Dessalegn, from the Southern region, did also make a number of suggestions for economic and social reforms, but he was unable to make any real progress in the face of TPLF intransigence, not least because he was seen by the other parties, not altogether accurately, as a TPLF mouthpiece.

By 2018 TPLF leaders were certainly well aware of the need for reform. The first State of Emergency in 2016, was a reaction to widespread disturbances instigated by the Oromo youth protest movement, Qeerroo, later followed by the appearance of similar groups (Fana) in Amhara areas. Qeerroo activity originated due to concerns over the arbitrary expansion of Addis Ababa's city boundaries, taking over land farmed by Oromo farmers. The protests rapidly escalated into widespread demonstrations against government abuse, corruption and maladministration.

⁹² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=ET>

Both the EPRDF, and in particular the TPLF, also responded by launching programs of self-criticism and considering further reform.⁹³ However, for the EPRDF, this was overtaken by discussions preceding Hailemariam's resignation in mid-February 2018 and agreement on the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister at the end of March. The TPLF continued its discussions on internal reform, holding a six-week long Central Committee *gim gima* (evaluation) also in part a reaction to criticisms within the Tigray region, from new Tigrayan ethno-nationalist parties, Baitona, Third Weyene, and the Tigray Independence Party as well as from its longer established opponents, Arena and the Tigrayan Democratic Party which rejected ethnic federalism. This too was largely overtaken by events.

The growing pressure of continued unrest, and the Federal government failure to deal with it, brought together the Oromo and Amhara parties in the EPRDF, providing them with the opportunity to put together a firm enough alliance strong enough to encourage Hailemariam to resign. He did so on February 15, making it clear he believed it was necessary for an Oromo to succeed him. The most obvious possibilities were Lemma Megersa, President of the Oromia region and chair of the Oromo party, and Abiy Ahmed, his deputy and head of the Oromo party secretariat. The person most prominent in 2017 in organizing Oromo and Amhara pressure on the TPLF was Lemma, much the more popular and more respected. Political discussion prior to 2018 constantly emphasized the work that "Team Lemma" had done in dealing with problems in Oromia and Lemma's own increasing status within the EPRDF. Indeed, Lemma was widely spoken of as a possible premier for several months before Hailemariam resigned.

For Abiy to become the Oromo candidate for the chair of EPRDF and for Prime Minister required some careful political manoeuvrings. Lemma might be the most obvious Oromo candidate but he was not a member of parliament, a requirement for becoming chair of the EPRDF and thus prime minister. The alternatives were to arrange a by-election or to replace Lemma as party chairman. This was the option Abiy persuaded the party to adopt, to take the tactical decision to replace Lemma by Abiy, allowing the party to continue with its leading role in the anti-TPLF alliance, making Abiy its candidate for the leadership of the EPRDF at the meeting of the 180-strong executive committee meeting which began on March 1. In effect, after February 2018, Abiy out-manoeuvred Lemma, who accepted the situation in order to ensure the choice of an Oromo as Prime Minister and ensure the defeat of the TPLF.

Discussions in the EPRDF Council were protracted, and rancorous, before Abiy was elected EPRDF chair on March 29. There were four candidates, the heads of the four member parties. Out of the 168 votes cast, Abiy received 108 votes. These included

⁹³ Jawar Mohammed noted that EPRDF's Executive Committee meeting in December 2017 had reached an agreement on partial political liberalization, the release of prisoners and the repeal of the state of emergency. but this had been accompanied, particularly in Oromia, by a security vacuum with administration paralyzed and replaced by organized youth and communal violence and displacement. Jawar Mohammed. "Managing transition in Ethiopia: Averting a looming danger", <https://addisstandard.com/opinion-managing-transition-in-ethiopia-averting-a-looming-danger/> 14.6.2018

all the Oromo votes, and after Demeke Mekonnen, the Amhara candidate, withdrew in effect assuring Abiy's success, virtually all the Amhara votes.⁹⁴ Abiy also received a dozen or so Southern votes and even a little Tigrayan support. The other two candidates were the Southern leader, Shiferaw Shigute, who took 58 votes, a majority of the southern party and most of the Tigrayan votes, while Debretsion Gebremichael, chair of the TPLF, received only 2. Most of the TPLF voted for a southern option as the least dangerous option for the TPLF. On April 2, Abiy was elected Prime Minister by the House of Representatives.

In the best traditions of democratic centralism, the TPLF accepted the vote, if with little enthusiasm. TPLF members were not impressed by Abiy. TPLF chair, Debretsion was heard to remark that he thought Abiy, aged 41, was too young for the job, and the NISS head, Getachew Assefa did not think Abiy had sufficient capacity to cope with the problems. Of most concern, however, were the proposed changes that Abiy was looking to make and which he spelt out in his first address to parliament. And these appeared to largely aimed at limiting what he saw as the TPLF's underlying control of governance, the economy and security, in its influence and command of the 'deep state'. Abiy's ideas also appeared to threaten the 'developmental state' as established by the TPLF/EPRDF, and even threaten the operation of the federal constitution. An additional concern for the TPLF was Abiy's insistence on resolving relations with Eritrea. Nobody, in theory, objected to ending the state of 'no war, no peace' with Eritrea, a situation that had continued since the end of the war with Eritrea in 2000, and which benefitted neither country. However, President Isaias was a sworn enemy of the TPLF which he regarded as responsible for the UN sanctions against Eritrea and his own near isolation for nearly twenty years, and had frequently made it clear he wanted its removal politically, and indeed its destruction. For the TPLF, any deal with Eritrea needed its involvement. The TPLF's concerns were intensified by Abiy's obvious suspicion of the TPLF and his assumption it was intending to try and take action to restore its previous status.

Certainly, it was clear from the outset that Abiy saw a need to consider changes in the federal structure though his approach changed significantly between 2018 and 2020. In April 2018, the choice of Abiy as Prime Minister within the framework of ethnic federalism was seen as elevating the Oromo to control of administration and policy. As the chair of the EPRDF's Oromo party, Abiy was expected to follow the example of the TPLF and increase the number of his own ethnicity, the Oromo, in Federal government at the expense of Tigrayans. He did indeed do so to a considerable expense and underlined this by the launch of investigations into the alleged corruption of the previous regime. Oromo activists saw Abiy's appointment and his early decisions as the start of a new dispensation. Jawar Mohammed, owner of the Oromo Media Network (OMN), who claimed a million and a half Facebook followers, and who had persistently argued for a greater Oromo role in Federal Government and realistic Oromo regional self-determination, welcomed Abiy's appointment. The Qeerroo groups were quick to see his appointment as an

⁹⁴ After Abiy became Prime Minister, Demeke retained his position as Deputy Prime Minister and has since added the Foreign Ministry to his portfolio.

opportunity to demand an 'Oromo First' policy, calling for genuine self-rule in the Oromia regional state and for Oromos to predominate in federal government.

One side effect of the events of 2017-18, and increasing divisions within the EPRDF, was the virtual collapse of party control at local level, and as party and administration officials were in effect indistinguishable, a near collapse of local authority. Within weeks of Abiy's accession to the premiership, dozens of local conflicts broke out across Ethiopia. Most had a long genesis in the stresses and strains of two decades of ethnic federalism, and a number involved deliberate efforts by the Oromia and Amhara regional state governments to expand their territory. There were border conflicts between Oromos and Somalis, Amhara and Gedeo; between Wolayita and Sidama; Gurage and Kebena; Somalis and Afars; Berta and Gumuz and Amhara; and the Amhara region made threatening noises over western and southern Tigray.

Another effect of the security problems of 2015 and the continued rise in violence, was a considerable increase in regional militarization, and the creation of regional Special Forces, an additional paramilitary force intended to deal with more serious problems. Under the constitution, regional states have the right to organize their own police forces, and provide these with regular police training and any weapons necessary to enforce the law at local level. Local militia forces also operate as an adjunct to the local police. The idea of military training and heavier arms for 'Special Forces' at the regional level was first introduced in 2007 in the Somali region to control large-scale Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) insurgency. The activities of this force, the *Liyu* [special] regional police, though successful, acquired a highly unsavoury reputation under the Somali regional president, Abdi Iley, who was removed at an early stage of Prime Minister Abiy's reforms in 2018. The reputation of the *Liyu* police, however, did nothing to prevent other regions raising their own Special Forces after 2015, notably both the Oromo and Amhara regions. Amhara Special Forces were heavily involved in the November fighting in Tigray. The Tigray region also substantially enlarged both its militia and its Special Forces in 2018-2019.

The effective collapse of local government and traditional patterns of authority, and the rise of largely unstructured local youth groups, the *Qeerroo* and the *Fana*, also encouraged outbreaks of violence in a dozen cities and numerous smaller towns, many in the Oromo region. Most of these related to land and corruption issues and were driven by expectations of the implementation of reform. The problems were compounded by the return of externally based opposition groups, several from Eritrea where they were being trained and armed.⁹⁵ This certainly played a role in the upsurge of ethnically based violence in the later part of 2018 and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Subsequently, the Prime Minister, as part of his demonization of the TPLF and

⁹⁵ At least one, a major faction of the Oromo Liberation Front which, in theory, supports an independent Oromia, was allowed to keep its arms on its return. Subsequent events in western Wollega suggest this might have been a mistake.

Tigrayans, ascribed this upsurge of conflict to the machinations of the TPLF, arguing that this was all part of a policy aimed at inciting violence to discredit his government and derail his reforms, and ultimately restoration of TPLF control. The government has produced little evidence of this, though Abiy himself told Parliament in November 2020 that there were 113 outbreaks of ethno-nationalist violence that could be ascribed to the TPLF activity since he became prime minister. He also referred to the TPLF plans to seize control of the Northern Command weapons as the first stage in more extensive plans: "The aim was to attack the Northern Command first and to control Gondar and Woldiya in the morning. After they controlled Gondar and Woldiya, they would cause explosions in Addis Ababa, Adama, and Hawassa through their agents and then the country would enter into chaos so that they could do what they wished after that. Some people from here were also preparing themselves with such thinking that they would become a government when the regime is changed." ⁹⁶ Apart from the TPLF attack on Northern Command bases in early November, nothing has been produced in support of such accusations and they seem highly implausible.

While one immediate element in the problems that arose between the TPLF and the Prime Minister in 2018 might have revolved around issues of power and control, the wider underlying question remained the relationship between the central government and the regional states. The relationship between federalism and ethnicity in effect provided for an ideological dispute over the type and extent of the implementation of federalism in Ethiopia under the Constitution of 1995. While it dominated the government, the TPLF had been committed to a centralized ethnic/linguistic federalism, offering a carefully controlled amount of self-determination to those peoples who had been traditionally marginalized by a perceived and previous Amhara-centric imperial regime. As its own dominance began to fragment after 2015, while accepting the need for reform, the TPLF certainly tried to manipulate the system. And in response to the growth of 'Ethiopiawinet' (Ethiopianess), pan-Ethiopian unity rather than a federal construct, the TPLF began to emphasize the importance of ethnic federalism in 2019-2020 as a rallying point among the country's minority nationalities. Most of the smaller nationalities claim to have been marginalized under previous regimes, as in fact do the Oromo. Regional autonomy, though never effectively applied by the TPLF, nevertheless remains seen as a protection against any of the over-centralizing authorities which historically marginalized the minorities.

This gained some traction, especially among Oromo ethno-nationalists, suspicious of Amhara ambitions, but there was real reluctance to offer support to the TPLF because of the perception that it had for quarter of a century operated a repressive, and latterly highly corrupt, regime with its own members taking the leading role in military and security services and in government and administration. Prime Minister Abiy also pre-empted the possibility of any substantial open Oromo support for the TPLF by disbanding the ERPDF and creating the Prosperity Party (PP) in December

⁹⁶ Abiy: Speech to Parliament: 30.11. 2020 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/22/the-causes-and-course-of-the-tigray-conflict-according-to-abiy-ahmed/> (English version)

2019, bringing together the EPRDF parties and its five associated parties. The only party that refused to join was the TPLF. A few months later he also took the opportunity to arrest leading Oromo opposition figures, in June 2020. It should be emphasized, however, that Abiy's success in preventing other nationalities supporting the TPLF does not, however, indicate any lessening of their concern over the steady shift of Abiy's policies towards 'Ethiopiawinet', a concern which is being intensified by events in Tigray.

Federalism and the Constitution of 1994-95 can perhaps be described as an experiment in multilateralism; Abiy's attempt to redraw it, an approach paralleled by the changes he has introduced in foreign policy, is largely a response to populist demand, significantly modified by his own interests and aims. What he is offering with the creation of a single party, the PP, is a modified and reduced form of self-determination without providing a more democratic reality than had previously existed. His own autocratic, religiously-flavoured, version of democracy and politics apparently provides for compulsory unanimity without participation or rather without equality. For his critics, in other words, it threatens a return to an imperial past of traditional autocratic politics, perhaps without an emperor in name, but once again marginalizing and side-lining the non-Amhara nations and nationalities, sweeping away the gains these groups have acquired since 1991 under ethnic federalism, even when only partially and poorly implemented.

Abiy originally had the support of the Oromo, the Amhara and most of the southern nations, nationalities and peoples. Removing the TPLF's excess presence in government and administration and replacing its [over-] centralized federal system was widely welcome. But it wasn't long before his actions raised suspicions that his reforms and other changes were aimed less at creating an effective ethnic federal structure and more at a centralized government replicating the 'Ethiopiawinet' of the past. His friendship with the region's most authoritarian leader, President Isaias, and his more publicity-focused actions, have added to the concern with which many now regard him. The honeymoon lasted less than a year.

3.6 Prime Minister Abiy's short-lived whirlwind of reform

Once in place, Prime Minister Abiy launched a whole series of reforms, positioning himself as a young (41), charismatic, energetic, reforming leader, and catching the attention of Ethiopians and of the world. In a well-received inaugural address to the House of People's Representatives, he apologized for past abuses and called on exiled opposition groups (several of whom were being armed, trained and supported by President Isaias in Eritrea) to return. He appealed for unity, pledged to respect all human and democratic rights, especially freedom of expression, assembly and organization. He promised to introduce economic reforms and to tackle

corruption, emphasizing the needs of youth and women. He also said he was ready to resolve differences with Eritrea and called on Eritrea to do the same.⁹⁷

Over the next months, he announced a series of reforms and appointments, freeing thousands of political prisoners, promised free and fair elections, gender equality, economic changes including extensive privatization, the opening up of the media and revision of controversial anti-terrorist and CSO laws. It was all buttressed by the publication of his own personal philosophy of *Medemer*, which emphasized reconciliation on the basis of synergy, unity, dialogue, for both Ethiopia and the region, underlining the importance of keeping the best of the past while moving to the future.⁹⁸

The most striking step was the achievement of a Peace Accord with Eritrea, which gained Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize for 2019. The citation included some of the accomplishments of his first 100 days: lifting the State of Emergency, releasing political prisoners, removing media censorship and legalizing opposition groups, as well as engaging in other peace and reconciliation processes in East and Northeast Africa. Displaying considerable prescience, the citation also noted that “some people will think this year’s prize is being awarded too early” but added the Nobel Committee believed that Abiy Ahmed’s efforts deserve recognition and needed encouragement.⁹⁹

It all seemed to be too good to be true, and it was. Abiy faced significant political difficulties in the implementation of his programs, and his responses rapidly seemed to hark back to his own past as a member of the repressive EPRDF/TPLF regime that he had tried to distance himself from as he became prime minister and which he subsequently excoriated so strongly. He had been in office less than a year when he was warning ‘spoilers’ that his patience was not inexhaustible. His own certainties, coupled with impatience and refusal to listen to criticism or even questions have too often negated any possibility of dialogue over his proposed policies, despite the supposed centrality of dialogue and unity to his philosophy of *Medemer*. His alliance with President Isaias of Eritrea led him into new and problematic areas of policy including the horrific levels of violence displayed in his ‘law enforcement operation’ in Tigray which, since November 2020, seems to have displayed all of the more traditional and repressive activities and human rights abuses so prevalent in the past in Ethiopia and so dominant in Eritrea under President Isaias.

One policy that achieved particular resonance for the international community, despite the widespread failure to implement anything similar elsewhere, was Abiy’s announcement, in October, of a cabinet offering gender parity. Half of the ministers in the cabinet were women, including the important posts of Minister of Defence and the new Ministry of Peace, with a portfolio overseeing the rival

⁹⁷ Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Inaugural Address. 9.4.2018 <https://www.africanexponent.com/post/9403-abiy-ahmeds-speech-of-the-century-preaches-hope>

⁹⁸ <https://medemer.et/>

⁹⁹ Reuters 11.10.2019 Full text of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize Citation. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nobel-prize-peace-fulltext-idUSKBN1WQ15N>

intelligence/security agencies, the National Intelligence and Security Service and the Information Network Security Agency, the Federal police, the National Disaster Management Commission, the Main department for Immigration and Nationality Affairs and several other related agencies. Women were also appointed as President of Ethiopia (Sahle-work Zewde), and as Chief Justice (Meaza Ashena), with a mandate to reform the judiciary, and as chair of the National Electoral Board (Birtukan Mideksa). Critics, however, were quick to notice that the gender balance did not continue lower down the administrative hierarchy. Women only held 25% of the appointments at state ministerial level, and far fewer at lower levels. When 20 new ambassadors were appointed in early in 2021, only two were women.

In his February 2019 interview with the Financial Times, Abiy noted he had freed all journalists and opened up the media.¹⁰⁰ The Committee to Protect Journalists in its 2018 annual Prison Census report on journalists imprisoned for their work included no Ethiopians for the first time in 14 years.¹⁰¹ A Media Law Working Group (MLWG) was established and there was a significant increase in the number of private print and electronic media outlets. By mid-2020, there were 13 public and 26 commercial television stations, 10 public and 15 commercial radio stations, 54 community radio and television stations, and nearly 50 print media products.

However, it was only a matter of months after April 2018 that the federal government was again closing off the Internet, and reports surfaced of Oromo journalists being arrested, with signs of an increasingly hostile environment for commentators on events in Ethiopia. Amnesty International was demanding the release of five journalists arrested a month earlier in October 2019.¹⁰² This steadily intensified with the increasing amount of ethnic conflict, the threat of conflict with Tigray and the outbreak of war, producing an increasing amount of self-censorship. In early November, 2020, a senior editor for Addis Standard, was arrested and accused of “attempts to dismantle the Constitution through violence” and “outrage against the Constitution”. Released shortly afterwards, he was rearrested and held for a month. The authorities deported the Crisis Group’s Senior Analyst on Ethiopia, William Davison, allegedly for irregularities over his work permit on November 21, 2020.¹⁰³ The same day, they also issued warning letters to Reuters, the BBC and Deutsche Welle.¹⁰⁴

In January this year, a journalist working for Tigray TV was shot and killed by federal security forces a week after he had been briefly detained. Armed men raided the home of a freelance reporter in Addis Ababa and threatened to kill her if she continued investigating stories about the conflict in Tigray. Ethiopia’s Ambassador to Washington issued a sharp warning to journalists to “abide by the most stringent ethical standards”, claiming the major print media was telling falsehoods against the Ethiopian government about complicity in “massacres, torture, rapes, abductions,

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/433dfa88-36d0-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812>

¹⁰¹ <https://qz.com/africa/1494561/ethiopia-has-no-jailed-journalists-in-2018-the-first-since-2004/>

¹⁰² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/ethiopia-release-journalists-arrested-on-unsubstantiated-terrorism-charges/>

¹⁰³ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-expels-crisis-group-senior-analyst>

¹⁰⁴ <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/10/394224/World/Africa/Ethiopia-suspends-Reuters-in-country-correspondents.aspx>

and the looting” in Tigray.

The government’s claim that both local and international journalists had been provided with access as early as November to cover the active phase of the rule of law operations and had filed reports, and it was therefore wrong to claim no media access, were not shared by the media. It was not until mid-February 2021, that the government announced that seven media agencies could have limited access to Tigray - AFP, Al Jazeera, New York Times, France 24, Reuters, BBC and Financial Times.¹⁰⁵ Over the next few days, however, several journalists working in Mekelle as translators or fixers with these agencies were arrested or beaten in a specific effort to intimidate them in advance of international media arrival. The ENDF arrested two journalists in Mekelle who were, it said, broadcasting ‘false propaganda’.¹⁰⁶

The Committee to Protect Journalists 2020 Prison Census, published in December, once again had to include Ethiopian journalists, seven of them, the third highest number in sub-Saharan African countries, after Eritrea and Cameroon, though six were subsequently released.¹⁰⁷ That same month, the Council of Ministers approved a new Media Proclamation outlining the media’s legal responsibilities, and penalties for flouting these.¹⁰⁸ The Prime Minister said this would bolster freedom of expression and press freedom; human rights groups argued it had created the legal means to muzzle critics.¹⁰⁹

Relations with journalists look set to continue. In March, the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority announced it would take ‘corrective measures’ against media outlets that challenged Ethiopia’s sovereignty, or endangered the unity of its people and the country’s peace. Its Deputy Director-general said a media monitoring assessment of the ‘law enforcement campaign’ in Tigray had showed that some foreign media outlets reports were “full of bias, unbalanced, and inaccurate” and this raised questions about journalism and professional ethics. Journalists who entered the region after the government's approval were producing unbalanced, biased, inaccurate, and distorted reports, completely denying the Ethiopian government's efforts to rebuild the region. Seven international agencies were authorised and were in the region; no journalist needs permission to operate there. The government remained committed to its promise to protect media freedom and had not yet prosecuted media professionals who violated the media laws. It had only revoked licenses or expelled them. The government, he stressed, would continue to support the media sector “as long as it does not challenge the sovereignty, unity of the people and the country’s peace.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ <https://thespeakernewsjournal.com/world/ethiopian-government-allows-seven-international-media-outlets-to-report-in-the-tigray-region/>

¹⁰⁶ <https://addisstandard.com/news-journalists-rearrested-in-tigray-army-claims-they-were-preparing-to-broadcast-false-propaganda/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/12/record-number-journalists-jailed-imprisoned/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/12/record-number-journalists-jailed-imprisoned/>

¹⁰⁹ Eritrea Hub, Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict and the battle to control information. 16.2.2021

¹¹⁰ [Ethiopian News Agency: EBA press statement 14.3.2021.](#)

The steps towards reform of the judiciary, and for reconciliation, another strong focus of Abiy, have also made less progress than might have been expected. A reform plan for the federal courts was adopted in mid-2019, but the five-year strategic plan with a focus on judicial independence and the provision of prompt and good quality judicial activity, was only due to start in 2021. Some widely criticised laws, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, the Anti-Terrorist Proclamation and the Media law have also been revised, though the latter, in particular, remains controversial. The Federal Attorney General has drafted a five-year National Human Rights Action Plan, ostensibly giving priority to civil and political rights, and rights of women, children, persons with disabilities, refugees and other vulnerable groups, as well as calling for human rights education at national level. Significantly, it doesn't include the signing of some international conventions allowing scrutiny of government activities. Equally, the military operations and the steadily increasing and horrifying evidence of the reality of atrocities in Tigray, as well as of other ethnic killings of Amhara and other nationalities elsewhere, effectively render it irrelevant. Since November 4 and the Federal government's 'law enforcement operation' and even more since Prime Minister Abiy declared operation a success and finished, human rights abuses and humanitarian problems have intensified in Tigray. There is now a major humanitarian crisis in the region "characterized by food shortages, widespread looting, rape, and sexual violence." Tigrayans also claim they are suffering from ethnic profiling in Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

The violence against Tigrayans has been far in excess of any other conflict, but both Oromo and Amhara ethno-nationalists also now see themselves as being the targets of each other, as well as of Abiy and the critics of federalism and supporters of pan-Ethiopian unity. The Federal government's response to assassinations in Bahir Dar and in Addis Ababa (June 22, 2019) included a wave of arrests, but to many in the Amhara region, the person responsible for what was identified as an attempted coup, Brigadier General Asaminew, was a hero, and after his death, a martyr. His efforts to increase the size of the Amhara Special Forces over the previous months were to be welcomed not criticised. Widespread demonstrations in April 2021 by Amhara underlined the continuing perception, even if encouraged for political reasons by ethno-nationalist parties, that the Amhara had become the target of Oromo violence. Oromo nationalists have seen themselves as the target of Abiy and pro-unity Amhara elements since 2019, an assessment reinforced by the arrests of the leaders of the main Oromo opposition parties in mid-2020.

Abiy told the Financial Times in January 2019 that he had released 60,000 political prisoners, significantly expanding the policy begun by his predecessor, Hailemariam, who had released 6,000 in January 2018.¹¹¹ It was only a year later, however, before protestors were being rounded up again in considerable numbers. Tens of thousands have been detained in the last two years following demonstrations in the Oromo region and ethnic clashes elsewhere. Most recently in 2020-21, thousands of Tigrayans in the security forces have been detained, and Tigrayans in other areas of government

¹¹¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/433dfa88-36d0-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812>

employment have lost their jobs.¹¹² Despite federal government denials, since November 2020, and even before, Tigrayans have been targeted in what looks increasingly like a policy of ethnic profiling.¹¹³

In fact, Abiy's policies, whether by accident or design, have seriously expanded the underlying problem of ethnicity, and the related issues of regional difference, land and resource conflict, and democracy. Politics, and here Abiy is certainly responsible, have become increasingly ethnicised, driven by his attack on Tigray and Tigrayans.

Home-grown Economic reform

Abiy's overall approach to policy is clearly visible in his economic strategy: substantial promises, and rather less achievement. The 'Home-grown Economic Reform', the basis for the 10-year Development Plan announced a year later, was announced in mid-2019, aiming for sustainable economic growth and major job creation, with macroeconomic reforms to improve the efficiency of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) as well as privatise some government organizations. It includes partial privatization planned for key state-owned enterprises, Ethiopian Airlines, Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation, and EthioTelecom, with others, including sugar plantations and industrial parks, to be fully privatised. It provides for implementation of a comprehensive and controlled remittance strategy; the control inflation; to modernize banks, and while keeping control of the financial sector, allows Islamic banking; and improved financial access. It also identified four sectors, agriculture, manufacturing, mining and tourism as areas on which to concentrate. Abiy, stressing Ethiopia is "now fully open for business" called the agenda "the bridge to prosperity".¹¹⁴

Welcomed by international agencies because of the emphasis on development of the private sector, the privatisation of major public enterprises and the opening up of the economy to foreign investors, marks a significant departure from the EPRDF's developmental state. In a clear shift towards neo-liberal global policy, the government has demonstrated significantly greater responsiveness to external partners, including the World Bank and the IMF as well as to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The Home-grown Economic Reform ran into criticism at the outset for its lack of public involvement. Adopted in September 2019, the policy, drafted and adopted by Abiy before any public debate, ignored the interests of many stakeholders and local policy-makers. A subsequent 'discussion process' was widely dismissed as no more than a gesture to try to pacify critics. It was also in effect overtaken by the onset of COVID-19 and the impact this have had on the strategies to mitigate unemployment, inflation, foreign exchange and debt. At the structural level, this has meant longer delays over implementation of the privatisation process and any efforts to address

¹¹² <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/clean-insides-ethiopia-detains-tigrayans-061253144.html>

¹¹³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/04/ethiopia-airlines-accused-ethnic-profiling-civil-war-tigray/>

¹¹⁴ (<https://www.pmo.gov.et/initiatives/>).

bottlenecks, and improve tax policies and regulations. It also seems to have delayed any real effort to increase transparency, if indeed this was ever the intention. Other major lacuna in the process include the lack of reference to the importance of regional development either in the objectives or in the details of the reform program, despite the acknowledged disparities in regional development, including “universities, airports, network infrastructure and industrial parks”.¹¹⁵ Questions have been raised over the government figures used in the presentation of the Reform.¹¹⁶

Abiy himself remained upbeat about the progress of reform when he introduced the 2020-21 budget in the House of Representatives in July last year. He said the reform agenda had produced real results in the macroeconomic and productivity sectors and relaxed debt stress and improved the budget gap.¹¹⁷ External debt had fallen from 31% to 25% of GDP, following his efforts to extend or reschedule debts. It had enhanced private sector capacity and increased agricultural productivity, making finance available for small holder farmers – he mentioned the amount spent on water pumps, imported duty-free, and increased allocations for irrigation. Nominal GDP, he said, had increased from 2.2 trillion *birr* (USD 85 billion) in 2018 to 3.4 trillion *birr*, (USD 100 billion) in 2020. The Prime Minister also noted the economic impact of COVID-19 on the economy but surprisingly said exports had increased by 15% over the previous year despite the pandemic. The projections for the current year, however, must have been seriously affected by the increased spread of the pandemic, and continuing and indeed increasing inter-ethnic, the continuation of the war in Tigray, and if reports are accurate, by the promised subventions to Eritrea for the use of the Eritrean army. The government’s current claim that GDP growth this year will still reach 8.5% is clearly highly optimistic. The latest projection of the IMF, which has approved a nearly USD 3 billion support program, is a rather more plausible 2.0%.

Ethnic conflict

The lack of direction in the ruling EPRDF, increasingly apparent after 2015, and intensified by the efforts to marginalize and then remove three decades of TPLF influence and control after April 2018, allowed regional ethno-nationalist interests to operate almost unchecked. There was a sharp upsurge in inter-ethnic violence with millions displaced, extensive destruction of property and numerous killings, across almost every region of the country. The one exception, prior to November 2020, was the Tigray Regional State and this appears to have been one reason why Prime Minister Abiy later blamed all of these problems on the TPLF. He told Parliament on November 30 that there had been at least 113 major conflicts that had occurred in every region except Tigray,¹¹⁸ with the ‘junta’ (TPLF) creating antagonism and

¹¹⁵<https://duckduckgo.com/?q=Tsegaye+Tegenu%3A+Homegrown+Economic+Reform+and+Regional+Development+in+Ethiopia+ECADF+26.12.2019&t=osx&ia=web>

¹¹⁶ Alemayehu Geda: Critique of Ethiopia's PM Abiy's new "Homegrown" Policy 2019. September 2019. Researchgate.net

¹¹⁷ <https://www.capitalethiopia.com/featured/economic-reforms-bearing-fruits-pm-abiy/1> 3.7.2020

¹¹⁸ Abiy Speech to Parliament 30.11.20 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/22/the-causes-and-course-of-the-tigray-conflict-according-to-abiy-ahmed/> (English version)

enmity between different ethnic groups, adjacent regions and even neighbouring countries. He cited 37 major conflicts in Oromia, 23 in Amhara region, 15 in Benishangul-Gumuz, 14 in Addis Ababa, and others in Gambella, the South, Dire Dawa, and Harar, and between the Somali and Afar regions. All, Abiy asserted, were the work of the TPLF, which had worked “to sow great mistrust and suspicion between the peoples of Ethiopia”. He added that it had also tried to persuade the Sudan government to take over disputed lands along the border. The Prime Minister said Sudan had rejected the proposal and had informed him about the suggestion. This presumably referred to the area of al-Fashaq which Ethiopia said was taken over by Sudanese a few days after the Prime Minister’s speech.

The Prime Minister’s catalogue of inter-ethnic violence underlined the fact that since he came to power, there had been an enormous displacement of people. In 2018 alone, according to international NGO reports, nearly three million people were forced to leave their homes, mainly because of violence; government figures were significantly smaller. There was conflict in a number of woredas in or along the borders between Amhara and Tigray, Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz.¹¹⁹ Another major area of violence was all along the 1400 km. interface between the Oromo and Somali regions. The creation of the Oromo and Somali regions in 1994-5 had enforced a boundary that cut through many communities with close intra-ethnic and intra-clan links, and left a legacy of disputes all along the border. The National Election Board in 2004 organized a referendum in 422 *kebeles* for people to choose which side of the border they wished to live. 323 (80%) chose Oromia; 93 the Somali region. It did not, however, settle disputes over land, grazing and water. Nor did it do away with interest in acquiring extra resources, or ethno-nationalistic demands for the recovery of previously administered territories that had been adjusted when the Constitution was drawn up.¹²⁰ In 2016/17 a series of clashes led to over a million people being displaced on both sides of the border. This was one of the factors used by Oromo politicians, including Abiy, to generate support across Oromia for changes in the EPRDF.¹²¹ Another major confrontation along Oromia borders in 2018 was between the Gedeo people of the SNNPR and the Guji Oromo, again with an estimate of another million or so displaced.¹²²

These and similar clashes were also encouraged by the increased mobilization of Oromo and Amhara nationalist interests, driven in part by the choice of Abiy, a prime minister originally identified with Oromo interests. A related factor was the government call for opposition organisations in exile to return. Among these were the Oromo Liberation Front and Patriotic Ginbot 7, both of which had been based in Eritrea where they had been armed and trained.¹²³ Although Ginbot 7 disarmed on

¹¹⁹ This involved the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz, an area administered by Amhara before 1995, largely inhabited by Gumuz but with a considerable Amhara settler population. The southern border of Metekel is the Blue Nile and the zone hosts the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

¹²⁰ <https://issafrica.org/research/monographs/drivers-of-ethnic-conflict-in-contemporary-ethiopia>

¹²¹ Hagmann, T. and Mustafe Mohamed Abdi: *Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State, 2017 – 2018*, Research Memo, ISE, March 2020.

¹²² https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/files/IOM_Ethiopia_Gedeo-W.Guji_Sitrep_No.5_0.pdf

¹²³ EZEMA, established in May 2019 is made up of Ginbot 7, the Ethiopian Democratic Party, All-Ethiopian Democratic Party, Semayawi Party, New Generation Party, Gambella Regional Movement, and Unity for Democracy and Justice). It is led by Berhanu Nega, former leader of Ginbot 7.

arrival, the OLF did not, and one faction, OLF-Shene, or the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), has continued to be militarily active in the western areas of Oromo, in Wollega, as well as in the south near the Kenyan border. After its return, Ginbot 7 merged with several other opposition parties to form the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) which is opposed to ethnic federalism and supports a more centralised, unified, structure of government, and revision of the constitution. Ginbot 7, although a multi-ethnic organisation, gains its main support comes from the Amhara and from urban elites.

The continuing ethnic violence provided the Prime Minister with additional reasons in support of his own intention to unpick the ethnic elements of the EPRDF and replace this with a new single national party. The mechanics for this provided a major step in the breakdown in relations between the Federal Government and the TPLF as did Abiy's remarks to the FT, in January 2019, that he would like to move to a directly elected presidential system, rather than continue the indirect process conducted through parliament to choose the prime minister.¹²⁴ He also spoke of the "unity of the nation and national pride", though he accepted this could be a concern for supporters of more regional autonomy. The EPRDF parties had discussed the possibility of merging their four elements into a single party before, and had even set up a committee to look into the practicalities in 2008. It concluded there were both practical and ideological difficulties, the latter connected with the relationship between the Federal government and the regional state authorities which has become the central issue in the current war in Tigray, as well as in the process of holding the national elections which, after two postponements, are due in June 2021.

Creating the Prosperity Party

The failure of the EPRDF to resolve its own problems in 2017-18 or to produce a consensus for reform, certainly underlined the need for change. The idea of turning the Front into a single party had been considered several times before, being first raised formally at the EPRDF's 5th Congress in 2004. It set up a committee to consider the possibilities in 2008, but that failed to resolve the central problem of whether this should take the form of a merger of the four parties or of the creation of a new party.

A team was set up to make another study of merger possibilities in 2017. The study was expected to be presented at the EPRDF's 11th Congress held in Hawassa in October 2018 and then endorsed. In his opening speech, Abiy, who was re-elected chairman of the Front with 176/177 votes, stressed federalism was the way to go for Ethiopia, but warned it should not be mixed and confused with ethnic identity: "If

¹²⁴ Typically, the interview with the FT hit the headlines with Abiy's display of confidence: "I have done so many great things compared to many leaders. But I didn't do 1 per cent of what I am dreaming," and his assertion that he had known from the age of seven that he would one day lead the country. Such comments have given credence to a growing belief that he would prefer a much more centralised, even quasi imperial system of governance. <https://www.ft.com/content/ae678b6-346f-11e9-bb0c-42459962a812>

we are able to form regional administrations without confusing it with ethnic identities, then there is no question that federalism is the best option for Ethiopia's situation," adding a plea for treating all people equally and "not attack one another motivated by and based on our ethnic and religious differences." However, the study was not presented to the Congress as neither the Executive Committee nor the EPRDF Council had been able to discuss the proposals in advance.

The TPLF participated in the Congress, but in a statement shortly afterwards warned that rushed moves to dissolve EPRDF and create a single unified party posed a serious danger to the nation. It said it was necessary first to identify a vision or practices that could be unified, adding without identifying the dangers, "it is impossible to think about creating a single unified party." The statement, which said there was "no unity of command and trust between and among the sister parties of the Front", also referred to "the campaign to subdue the people of Tigray and TPLF from different directions".¹²⁵

Abiy's own version was that the TPLF had originally decided to resign from the EPRDF and not attend the Congress, but it had then changed its mind and decided to attend to cause trouble. He claimed later the 'junta' (an example of the unfortunate use of abusive language by the Prime Minister concerning his opponents) had developed a three-pronged strategy to undermine and thwart his work. One was insults delivered before the meeting; then it organized groups to create chaos in the assembly and encourage dissension and recrimination, and finally, bring in others who pretended to be mediators. It was all intended, he claimed, to cause confusion and chaos.¹²⁶

As Abiy indicated to the Congress, his growing support and emphasis on "Ethiopiawinet" posed an alternative to the TPLF's version of the EPRDF, the developmental state and the federal structure. Abiy countered the TPLF insistence that this threatened the very concept of a federal state by accepting, if under pressure and reluctantly, the Sidama demand for their own state, allowing a referendum which voted overwhelmingly for it, in November 2019. It had the unwelcome result of encouraging a number of other groups in the southern region to consider making their own claims for statehood which Abiy had tended to ignore.

Despite the failure of the EPRDF to consider a merger in 2018, Abiy pressed ahead with his plans both for bring the four EPRDF parties into one and to add the ruling parties of the remaining regional states, the five associate parties, previously identified by the EPRDF as failing to reach the right level of development for incorporation in the Front, a status all five resented.¹²⁷ In November 2019, a meeting of the EPRDF Council, boycotted by the TPLF but attended by the other three EPRDF parties, Oromo, Amhara and Southern, agreed to disband the EPRDF and

¹²⁵ <https://ecadforum.com/2019/10/20/eprdf-denounces-tplfs-stance-over-unified-party/>

¹²⁶ Abiy speech to PP officials, 8.10.2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DCIE6GRQs&feature=youtu.be> (Amharic)

¹²⁷ Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP), Benishangul-Gumuz Democratic Party (BDP), Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), Harari National League (HNL) and Somali Democratic Party (SDP).

merge in a new Prosperity Party.¹²⁸ After the three parties agreed to the change, the five EPRDF-associated ruling regional state parties also agreed to join the Prosperity Party (PP), which automatically controlled the Federal House of People's Representatives and all the regional states with the exception of Tigray. Each of the eight parties, became branches of the PP, contributing members to its central committee, and to an Executive Committee of 52. The NEBE quickly gave the party a certificate of registration, though its structure and by-laws were still unclear.

Abiy argued that what he proposed to call the Prosperity Party (PP) would strengthen national unity and minimize ethnicity.¹²⁹ It also offered the best prospect of ensuring his own position in the face of growing discontent among his former Oromo base. He was careful to continue to claim to support the concept of federalism, if not the ethnic variety, but the PP clearly endorsed the concept of Ethiopiawinet (unity) which had in effect been side-lined by the ERPDF in the constitution of 1995. With membership drawn directly from the former EPRDF parties, minus the TPLF, and from the former associated parties, the new party automatically acquired a membership base of several million members, quite sufficient to win any election.

The TPLF opposed the creation of the PP, and refused to join, arguing that it was a clear rejection of the federal principle. It also questioned, with some justice, the technical legality of the move.¹³⁰ Under EPRDF concept of "democratic centralism" full agreement from the four parties within EPRDF was necessary for such changes. The TPLF was not alone in its concerns, and leading figures in other parties also abstained from supporting the move, including one of Abiy's key allies, Lemma Megersa, the then Minister of Defence and former president of Oromia, and Muferiat Kamil, chair of the Southern party and Minister of Peace. Lemma has since lost his job though Muferiat remains in office. Both the Oromo and Southern parties of the EPRDF were in fact divided on the timing of the changes though not on the need for replacing the EPRDF. Others argued that Abiy should have acquired a new mandate via an election before creating a new ruling party out of the "three of the four components of a delegitimized and decaying EPRDF".

The PP claims to a national party designed to abandon the ethnic element, and as a national non-ethnic-based party, to be inclusive, representing all communities; it uses Amharic, Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, Somali and Afar as working languages. Equally, Abiy told the PP assembly last year: "Our party believes the federal system

¹²⁸ The TPLF argued that the dissolution of the EPRDF was illegal as it had not been agreed by all elements of the Front as required in its statutes. It also said any merger of parties required a common program, and this had not been provided, nor had any by-laws. There was, therefore no indication of the relationship between and among members.

¹²⁹ The name appears to be drawn from the controversial Evangelical prosperity theology, (the prosperity gospel) which essentially equates riches with virtue, holding that financial blessing and physical well-being are the will of God for a person, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes, will increase one's material wealth. With faith, God will deliver security and prosperity. It also emphasises personal empowerment. Christians are entitled to well-being, interpreted as physical health and economic prosperity. Positive confession allows Christians to exercise control over their own souls and over material objects around them. Prosperity churches encourage people to "live without limits", and cultivate optimism about their lives..

¹³⁰ <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/18/the-war-on-tigray-a-multi-pronged-assault-driven-by-genocidal-undercurrents/>

is viable, beneficial and conducive for Ethiopia ... Our commitment is to build a true, strong, and democratic federal system; rather than dissolving a system, we are building it better and implementing [it]." Indeed, since the members of the former all-ethnic parties provide most/all members of the PP chapters in their region, ethnicity by default remains a central feature, with party branches in each region being largely drawn from the region.

It is, in fact, difficult to see how far the different Prosperity Party branches will be able to reach consensus on ethnic issues, and the problems have already been apparent. They include Amhara expectation of retaining control of western Tigray, despite demands from the interim Tigray administration now being set up in Mekelle for the return of some areas now under Amhara administration. The respective Oromo and Amhara party branches are at odds over the future of Addis Ababa as a separate entity as the Amhara Prosperity Party insists, or whether it should in effect become Finfine, the capital of the Oromo region. Failing any change in Addis Ababa's status, both have an interest in controlling the city.

Both of these branches of the PP have already expressed concern over the security of their respective populations in each other's region, and as one observer puts it: "The differences in historical narratives that the elites from the two parties display in public to rile up their base is poisoning the politics".¹³¹ In March 2021, the Amhara and Oromia regional state chapters disagreed sharply over who might be responsible for an outbreak of violence in the Oromo Special Zone and North Shewa Zone of the Amhara regional state. The Amhara PP chapter accused the OLF-Shene, and the TPLF, as being behind the clashes, and repeated its assertions after the Oromo-PP released a statement blaming the members of the Amhara Special Forces.¹³²

In October 2020, effectively the first anniversary of the Prosperity Party, Abiy told party members that the party was making a real effort to provide a genuine response to the demand for nations and nationalities to administer themselves as well as allow people to exercise democracy. Previous parties, he said, suffered from the disease of conspiracy, power struggles and personal benefit. The PP was different. It supported the ideas he himself had laid out in his inaugural speech as Prime Minister: unity in diversity, need to restore justice, diaspora to cooperate, peace with Eritrea, youth participation, the genuine equality of women, press freedom, and democracy. The government, he said, had taken fast and bold decisions to deal with these and other issues including the poor state of the economy, falling exports, problems with GERD. One tangible action was the creation of the Prosperity Party to implement the ideas of his philosophy of *Medemer*, "designed to find a national solution to national problems."¹³³

In his acceptance speech for the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, Abiy offered a definition of

¹³¹ Tsedale Lemma, *Sunday Thoughts 2*, 14.3.2021

¹³² <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-romia-pp-engage-in-war-of-words-as-relative-peace-returns-to-violence-hit-areas/>

¹³³ Abiy speech to PP officials, 8.10.2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DCIE6GRQs&feature=youtu.be> (Amharic)

Medemer: “*Medemer*, an Amharic word, signifies synergy, convergence, and teamwork for a common destiny. It is a home-grown idea that is reflected in our political, social, and economic life. I’d like to think of ‘*Medemer*’ as a social compact for Ethiopians to build a just, egalitarian, democratic, and humane society by pulling together our resources for our collective survival and prosperity...At its core, *Medemer* is a covenant of peace that seeks unity in our common humanity”. Synergy in this context also meant “cooperation and collaboration to achieve an enhanced effect, [allowing] us to act synergistically to ensure a prosperous Ethiopia that provides for all its citizens.”¹³⁴

Abiy told the party members that the PP accepts the superiority of ideas over force, a positive-sum game, not a zero-sum game. It claims its approach can be summed up by several characteristics: a unique vision of prosperity, political, economic and social prosperity, to lift Ethiopia out of its present poverty, dealing with the problems of class, nations and democracy through application of *Medemer*, that is: “home grown thought and knowledge, the only way possible to solve existing problems”. Ethnic identity, language, culture were all necessary and should not be any threat to national identity; they work together building a country while maintaining their own identities. The party recognizes both those who supported individual rights and those who support group rights. There should be a balance between the private sector and government intervention; centrist politics offer a unique place in the political history of the country. The Prosperity Party also offers continuity of generation which neither the TPLF nor the OLF were able to do. It has embraced youth and the concept that new generations mean new ideas. Its system is adaptive, not robust, nor violent.

Elections and the Electoral Process

From the outset, Abiy has repeatedly promised to hold free and fair elections for both the Federal House of People’s Representatives and for regional state councils, a promise repeated by the now ruling Prosperity Party on several occasions since its foundation in December 2019. One of Abiy’s major reforms was reorganizing and restructuring the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) as an independent body reporting to the House of People’s Representatives, in June 2019. On the recommendation of the Prime Minister, a former opponent of the TPLF, Birkutan Medikssa, recalled from exile, was appointed to head the restructured Board.

The elections were originally due to be held in May 2020 but the timescale became impossible after the Prosperity Party was founded in December 2019. On security grounds, the NEBE postponed the date to August 2020. This was reluctantly accepted by opposition parties as the date still fell within the theoretical five-year mandate of the parliament and of the Prime Ministerial term of office which was due to run out in October 2020. Another postponement to October 5, 2021, however, moved it outside the constitutional time-frame. This time the reason given was the

¹³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jESA8MLAuCw>

problems posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was widely believed to relate to the need for a longer period needed to organise the Prosperity Party,

The decision was authorised by parliament, which thereby extended its own term, but the TPLF was quick to claim this was not authorised by the constitution. The added delay also gave the TPLF an opportunity to hold its own state elections before the deadline and claim a legitimacy that it argued the Prime Minister and the Prosperity Party no longer could have after October 2020. Although the National Election Board declared any separate Tigray election would be illegal, the TPLF went ahead with its own regional state council election in Tigray in September, winning 98% of the vote. The House of Federation, the Upper House of Parliament, and the guardian of constitutional issues, also declared the TPLF elections unconstitutional. The National Election Board promptly declared this meant the TPLF would be unable to participate in the June election. That decision was underlined by the war in November and the subsequent security issues. No realistic Tigrean involvement in any government organised election is possible, though the NEBE has registered some Tigrayan parties opposed to the TPLF, and the Prosperity Party itself claims to have a Tigrayan branch.

Despite its short life, the Prosperity Party has all possible advantages in the elections. With its membership including the former ruling parties in every regional state, with the exception of Tigray, it should easily win all the regional state councils as well as the Federal election. It is the only party capable of putting up candidates in all constituencies. No other party is putting up candidates in all constituencies. The nearest is Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) which has announced plans to field candidates in 435/547 constituencies. Control of government allows its officials to use public investment to boost their campaign, placing schools, hospitals, roads, irrigation facilities and any public works projects where they can most benefit the party. These financial benefits are underlined by the Prime Minister hosting 5- and 10-million-birr dinners for business leaders. How funds are raised and who provides them could in theory be an issue, but it is not one that appears to trouble the party leader. Abiy told Parliament last October that MPs should not and could not call him to account over donations made to him personally and that they had no right to question him over where he obtained funds or how he spent them. The current security situation with substantial areas of the country under Command Post, military, control also benefits the PP as the arm of government, making it difficult if not impossible for opposition candidates to open party offices, recruit candidates, or run election campaigns. It has the freedom to use public media at will, and can and does deny their use to opposition parties, despite the various agreements over the use of the media. It also has the support of notionally independent media like the Fana Broadcasting Corporation and Walta. Given the government and Abiy's increasingly negative attitude towards critical reporting as shown in Tigray, private media has been more and more careful to self-censor material.

Oromo nationalists, who originally supported Abiy in 2018 with great expectations that he would, as an Oromo, respond positively to their demands, were already becoming concerned about the direction of policy by early 2019. He made a substantial number of Oromo appointments after taking office but little effort to respond to more serious demands, such as giving Afaan Oromo the same status as Amharic, more autonomy to the Oromo region or reconsidering the status of Addis Ababa or giving the Oromo region more autonomy. His moves towards postponing the election and creating a single national party were seen as threatening to Oromo opposition parties which remain supportive of the concept of an Oromo region. The Oromo Federal Congress (OFC), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and activists like Jawar Mohammed consider an active federation with ethnic regional parties a necessity to protect and expand Oromo rights. Jawar, the founder of the Oromo Media Network, and originally a supporter of Abiy, finally joined the OFC after the creation of the Prosperity Party in 2019.

The breaking point between Abiy and the Oromo ethno-nationalists, who had originally supported him in ousting the TPLF, came in mid-2020 after the killing of a popular Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, on June 29.¹³⁵ His death led to a wave of violence in a number of towns as well as an inappropriate dispute over where the body should be buried. Abiy blamed domestic and foreign enemies, and a Prosperity Party Oromia branch spokesperson said the TPLF funded and worked with Jawar and the OLF to plan Hachalu's killing and destruction in towns in order to spark religious and ethnic violence which would lead to a security collapse. The Oromo regional government claimed 167 people were killed and more than 10,000 displaced in the subsequent demonstrations. A report, issued on January 1, 2021, by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), however, concluded that 123 people had been killed, more than half (76) by government security forces, 35 by individuals and groups, and 12 as a result of explosions or similar incidents. Its 59-page report, drafted after visits to forty towns, concluded: "The findings show that the attacks meet the elements of a crime against humanity with large numbers of people, organized in groups, having selected their victims on the basis of their ethnicity or religion when conducting a widespread and systematic attack in several different areas over the three days."¹³⁶

Abiy took the opportunity of Hachalu's death and the violence to arrest a swathe of opposition leaders, including Jawar Mohammed, and leading members of both the OFC and OLF, accusing them of inciting, orchestrating or organising the violence. Charges against Jawar also included the surprising allegation that he had been training terrorists in Egypt in order to assassinate Orthodox Christian priests, potentially increasing religious tensions. The government closed down Jawar's Oromo Media Network, shut down the Internet for three weeks and over the following month detained more than 9,000 people in Oromia. It announced more

¹³⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53238206>

¹³⁶ <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/crimes-against-humanity-committed-wake-hachalus-death-commission-says>
https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fdrive.google.com%2Ffile%2Fd%2F1oGkx-fFhTX_9AHolZjj8KwleWpyPZu5O%2Fview%3Fusp=sharing%26fbclid=IwAR3tGVRIalhq5KM3u9T13CO7yLD9k0xEwzfdAVq4vVB12Hkbhuwsl9TY4Q&h=AT1p0gKstGvluKSwvXTAoSyRB0wiavwFilJkIzdBh 1.1.2021

than 4,000 people would be prosecuted for the violence, including 1,200 regional officials for allegedly failing to discharge their responsibilities and 500 government employees for participation. A month later, a meeting of the Prosperity Party Oromo branch, suspended several leading figures including ex-Oromia president Lemma Mergessa, a former ally of Abiy, and the ex-mayor of Shashemene Teyba Hassen, accusing them of failure to discharge their duties.¹³⁷ It was hardly a surprise when, in March, the OFC and OLF decided not to participate in the election in June. Arrests have not been confined to Oromo politicians, they have also included Amhara ethno-nationalists and other politicians among them the founder and former president of the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), Lidetu Ayalew, who was also arrested in July 2020, accused of coordinating and financially supporting disturbances in Bishoftu. Eskinder Nega, founder of the Balderas for True Democracy Party, was also arrested a day or two after Hachalu's death along with six other members of his party, charged with trying to incite ethnic and religious violence, including the training of a terror group to assassinate the former acting Addis Ababa mayor and take power in the capital. Balderas supports a self-governing, multi-ethnic Addis Ababa. Eskinder was also accused of telling people that with the election postponed Abiy's government would no longer be a legitimate government.¹³⁸

There are numerous other issues that will affect the electoral processes besides security, the arrests of opposition leaders or the withdrawal of the two major Oromo opposition parties. Among the problems apparent at local level in the elections of 2010 and 2015 was the lack of distinction between ruling party and administrative officials at *kebele* (local) or *woreda* (district) level, with obvious effect on registration of voters, campaigning or of polling stations very few of which had observers. In 2010, for example, 170 observers visited 815 out of the 43,500 polling stations to observe voting and counting. In previous elections, state resources have commonly been used for ruling party campaigning; and opposition candidates routinely prevented from campaigning, subjected to arbitrary arrest, and other forms of harassment. The Prosperity Party includes the former members of the EPRDF or of its affiliated parties whose previous electoral behaviour was marked by intimidation and obstruction if not outright fraud. How far, as rebranded members of the Prosperity Party, they have changed their attitude is unclear, but almost all parties certainly suffer from poor organisation.

The lack of security, currently widespread, also benefits the PP as the arm of government. The creation of Command Posts, equivalent to imposing a state of emergency, which now cover around a third of the country, coupled with the arrest of leading political figures, closure of opposition branch offices and bans on meetings, makes it clear there will be no provision of a level playing field. This has been particularly apparent in the Oromo region, and Tigray, of course, is now effectively outside the whole process.

¹³⁷ <https://www.horndaily.com/2020/08/10/breaking-news-lemma-megersa-suspended-from-prosperity-party/>

¹³⁸ [Leul Estifanos, Ethiopian opposition leader Eskinder Nega charged with terror plot to kill ex-Addis Ababa mayor, Ethiopian Insight, 20.9.2021](#)

The final step in ensuring a victory for the PP has been extensive detention of political leaders from major opposition parties, notably the Oromo Federalist Congress, the Oromo Liberation Front and Baldaras for Genuine Democracy, and in a practical sense preventing them from any realistic participation. In March, 2021, the OLF, which earlier complained its own branch offices had been closed and its headquarters put under surveillance, announced it now felt unable to take part in the elections. The Oromo Federal Congress made a similar decision. The PP will face little or no opposition throughout the Oromia regional state.

The continuing political and security operations in Tigray and elsewhere and the jailing of opposition political leaders may guarantee a total victory for the ruling Prosperity Party in an election in June. It will not provide any realistic vote, any confidence in his version of democracy or of his *Medemer* philosophy, nor will it offer the legitimacy or the mandate that Abiy and his PP government need to have.

Military and Intelligence changes

From the start of his premiership, one of the areas of governance that most concerned Prime Minister Abiy was the possibility of Tigrean control of the 'deep state', and specifically of the military and security aspects. He himself had, of course, been a member of the army, reaching the rank of colonel, and involved in the setting up of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), of which he was acting director for two years. He was very aware of the ramifications of security links across all levels of government and administration.¹³⁹

Restructuring the 'deep state' was a priority from Abiy's point of view, and he launched the process on 7 June 2018 when General Samora Yunis, a Tigrayan who rose to be the Army Chief of Staff, and another Tigrayan, Getachew Assefa, Director of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), were both abruptly removed from office. General Samora, who had tried to resign a year or two earlier, accepted the decision and was retired with honour. Getachew a member of the TPLF Executive committee, as well as the long-time director of the NISS,¹⁴⁰ was "unhappy" and according to the Prime Minister immediately retired to Tigray, taking with him quantities of surveillance and military equipment. Getachew, later complained he had heard about his dismissal on the media. It had, however, been widely expected. Two weeks later, there was an apparent assassination attempt during a mass rally in Addis Ababa (June 23) when a grenade exploded and several people were killed just after Abiy had left the podium. Abiy blamed the security services, and Getachew was accused of being responsible. When a warrant was later issued for his arrest, the authorities in Tigray declined to send him back to Addis Ababa.

The government launched an investigation into the incident and the first results became public in November. Attorney-General Berhanu Tsegaye said on November

¹³⁹ [file:///Dawit Endeshaw/ The rise of Abiy "Abiyot" Ahmed, The Reporter 31.3.2018](https://www.dawitendeshaw.com/2018/03/31/Abiyot-Ahmed-The-Reporter-31.3.2018)

¹⁴⁰ INSA, set up in 2011 took over surveillance and the censorship of Internet traffic from the NISS

12 that 36 people had been arrested from the NISS and the Prison Service, for human rights' violations, including an ex-deputy head of the NISS and former Federal Police Commissioner, Yared Zerihun.¹⁴¹ In addition to the arrests, Abiy took the opportunity to make widespread changes in the senior ranks of the NISS, and INSA and in the Federal police, financial intelligence and defence institutions. He said all, had fallen under control of "individuals and families", by implication all Tigrayans. The Attorney-General's investigation had also covered the issue of corruption in the military-industrial complex, METEC.¹⁴² And in November, he also announced another 27 arrests for corruption. Those detained included the former head of METEC, Major-General Kinfe Dagneu who had resigned some months earlier.

A government produced documentary on METEC's embezzlement and mismanagement, assuming General Kinfe's guilt, was put out on TV the day after the general's arrest. The documentary raised allegations over the trading of arms between Iran and Somalia a few years earlier, irregular procurement procedures with inflated prices, including the acquisition of five aircraft, four of which were subsequently scrapped. Commentators were concerned that the way the arrests were handled and the Attorney General's statements amounted to a trial by media, rendering a fair trial impossible: "The documentary regarding embezzlement and mismanagement by METEC that was aired by the state broadcaster the day after the arrest of its former boss puts in jeopardy the constitutional right to the presumption of innocence."¹⁴³

The TPLF, however reluctantly, had accepted the actuality of proceedings against human rights abuse and corruption, but it was less than happy over the way these were being carried out. A day after the Attorney General's announcement, it issued a statement emphasizing that the rule of law should be respected. However, it also thought it necessary to underline that those responsible for corrupt practices came from the EPRDF in general, not just the TPLF, and from government as a whole. It was deeply concerned by the way General Kinfe's arrest was shown on television with attendant government media comments assuming his guilt.

The TPLF saw the apparent concentration on Tigrayans as a warning. There had been earlier efforts to move against corrupt officials and business associates under Abiy's predecessor, Hailemariam Dessalegn, with no apparent emphasis on Tigrayans, but most of those detained then had been released in the wide-ranging amnesty after Abiy took office. This time, there was no doubt that Tigrayans were in the frame,¹⁴⁴ and the arrests were seen as politicizing the issue of corruption. They

¹⁴¹ William Davison, Hayelom Tewelde: Abiy attacks impunity as MetEC and NISS officials held for graft and torture. Ethiopian Insight, 15.11.2018.

<https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/15/abiy-attacks-impunity-as-metec-and-niss-officials-held-for-graft-and-torture/>

¹⁴² METEC was a conglomerate set up in 2010 bringing together nine defence industry businesses in a state-owned military-industrial complex, grouping Defence Ministry businesses and related spare-part, vehicle and engineering companies, eventually incorporating over 70. with the aim to concentrate and improve Ethiopia's engineering capacity. It was headed by senior officers from Tigray.

¹⁴³ Ethiopian Insight 15.11.2018. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/15/abiy-attacks-impunity-as-metec-and-niss-officials-held-for-graft-and-torture/>

¹⁴⁴ The pattern of the arrests suggested the government was trying to split the TPLF, to take advantage of divisions within the organization, representing different military and political elements. There were claims that some of the information about

may have reinforced Abiy's reform credentials, but they increased concerns in Mekelle over the aims of the Prime Minister. Former Communications Minister, Getachew Reda, said it looked as if only Tigrayan leaders were responsible for past abuses under the ruling coalition. He thought Tigrayans were being turned into scapegoats. The President of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael declared the investigations and arrests, particularly that of General Kinfu, were politically motivated, and Tigrayans were being disproportionately targeted. In fact, the political nature of the charges was reinforced in February this year, when the government dropped charges against METEC officials and others accused of corruption or charged with human rights abuse - in order to "broaden national understanding." A central focus of Abiy's changes in the military was to alter the balance of perceived ethnic authority and control in the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). Critics of the TPLF had long maintained the senior ranks of the armed forces were almost exclusively Tigrayan, even claiming they made up over 90% of senior officers. While this might have been true in 1991, it was a considerable exaggeration by 2018 when only 50% or so of those holding the rank of Brigadier-General or above were from Tigray; the figure for majors and colonels was under 60%, and the numbers were falling steadily, though certainly still disproportionate. According to Abiy, percentages for other areas of command were significantly higher, including 80% of the senior posts within the Ministry of Defence, and most of the training and logistical institutions as well as all six sector commanders and deputy commanders.¹⁴⁵ The Prime Minister claimed army training had been tied to identifying the army as the vanguard of the EPRDF and defending the party's revolutionary democracy rather than Ethiopia, though this, at least in theory, represented a substantial change from earlier practice. General Tsadkan Gebretensae, a former army Chief of Staff (1994-2001) and all members of the armed forces were required by the Constitution in 1995 to resign from any political party or to leave the military, and did so.

Changes in 2018 included an extensive series of retirements and promotions aiming to balance senior positions between Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayans and Southerners, the areas represented by the four parties of the EPRDF, and to limit the Tigrayan element within the mechanized forces to 50%. Other measures reorganised the management structures to limit the number of representatives of any ethnicity at every level of command. Training was reorganised to ensure the army should think of itself as an *Ethiopian* army, entirely separate from political divisions or and political parties.

In addition to the changes in senior personnel and a reduction of the numbers of Tigrayan elements in various units, following the assassination attempt on June 23, Abiy also created his own Republican Guard. This was a substantially expanded version of the 'Agazi' brigade created by Meles which acted both as a guard unit for

corruption in METEC was provided by an anti-military group led by Getachew Assefa and one-time TPLF leader, Sebhat Nega. These divisions, which included reformist and non-reformist factions, had interfered with TPLF efforts to reform itself in 2017-2018, and also hindered TPLF attempts to produce a coherent response to Abiy's moves against it in 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Abiy: Speech to Parliament 30.11.2020 op.cit.

government offices and senior officials, and as a security strike force. It was reputed to be a wholly Tigrayan unit though its last commander was in fact an Oromo. The government also made what the Prime Minister later described as a “huge effort” to expand the army, launching a major recruiting drive in early 2019. A commission headed by Deputy Prime Minister, Demeke Mekonnen (Amhara), and his then security adviser, Abadula Gemedo, (Oromo) was set up to oversee the military and security reforms. Lt-General Mola Hailemariam, (Tigrayan) took control of the Federal Special Forces, overseeing the replacement of the Agazi brigade by the new Revolutionary Guard.

As part of the reconstruction, Abiy disbanded two of the six regional commands, those based at Enda Selassie in northern western Tigray and at Semere in the Afar regional state. These along with the Northern Command in Mekelle were part of the government’s anti-Eritrean strategy which became outdated with the Peace Accord with Eritrea signed in July 2018. The four remaining commands were the Northern Command still based at Mekelle; the Central /South Command, previously based at Hawassa, moved to Addis Ababa; Western Command, previously at Bahir in Amhara region, moved to Lekemte in western Oromia; and the Eastern Command at Harar/Jijiga. The number of commands was again increased to six again just prior to the outbreak of conflict in Tigray as part of the government’s preparations for its attack

Other changes were made in the air force, which the Prime Minister said needed to be revived. He also acquired a number of drones, later explaining that this was done in secret, and the necessary training as well as the number and deployment was kept from the TPLF. Drones played an important role in the conflict in November, their use apparently taking the Tigrayan forces by surprise. There was speculation that the drones used in Tigray were supplied by the UAE from its base at Assab in Eritrea. Given the alliance with Eritrea, this is highly plausible.¹⁴⁶

Although he was prepared to use Tigrayan officers, such as General Seare, Chief of Staff 2018-2019) or General Molla, whose loyalty Abiy felt was reliable, all these changes in the military hierarchy, the restructuring of units, expanded recruitment and acquisition of drones as well as of new equipment, certainly suggest the Prime Minister saw a need to neutralise the Tigrayan element in the army as a matter of urgent necessity, suggesting anticipation of conflict with the TPLF.

3.3 An inexorable drive towards conflict 2018-2020

Both the Prime Minister and the TPLF blame the other for the steady advance towards war in November 2020, and, as noted, they have produced very different narratives to assign culpability. It’s symptomatic of their dysfunctional relationship

¹⁴⁶ Equally, the ENDF could also have acquired drones from China or Israel. It might also have acquired some drones earlier from the US which was using them in Somalia operating out of a base at Arbaminch in southern Ethiopia. See: <https://www.youuav.com/news/detail/202012/46513.html>
<https://www.cepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-64-23-January-2021.pdf>

that that both sides have claimed they made every effort to avoid conflict and encourage reconciliation. Neither claim is realistic.

Prime Minister Abiy, of course, came to power as the result of an Oromo-Amhara alliance within the EPRDF to oust the TPLF from control of the Front and of the Federal government. This was never more than a tactical alliance between two parties with very different political aims and an equal desire for power, and its fundamental instability seemingly left Abiy vulnerable to TPLF efforts to restore their position within the EPRDF. This at least seems to have been one of his major concerns from the beginning of his premiership.

Certainly, it might be expected that the TPLF would be concerned, though hardly surprised, by the loss of control of the EPRDF and loss of positions in federal government. The Front was in disarray and the TPLF itself was divided. The proposed changes in social or economic affairs offered in Abiy's reform agenda little that was unexpected as almost all the proposed reforms had already been suggested, or considered by the EPRDF or Abiy's predecessor Hailemariam during his time in office. More worrying was the stress on total TPLF responsibility for all the problems of the past and for the excesses of an autocratic and repressive EPRDF government, and the apparent intent to make it the scapegoat for past abuses. This indeed encouraged many TPLF leaders to withdraw to Mekelle, the capital of the region, and keep out of harm's way. Additional concern developed over Abiy's avowed aim to replace the EPRDF by a single party and by his moves towards a more centrist, less federal approach, to government. The methodology employed by Abiy allowed the TPLF to complain that he was bypassing the EPRDF and even Parliament, but its failure to understand how far its years in government had exasperated other parties, meant it was unable to gather the necessary support to oppose him effectively. The TPLF also seriously under-estimated how far Abiy was prepared to go to ensure it could no longer pose any threat.

This, indeed, only became apparent when the Eritrean army began to pour into Tigray in mid-November 2020, though the TPLF worries stemmed from the Peace Accord with Eritrea that Abiy signed in July 2018. EPRDF policies towards Eritrea were of the most direct relevance to Tigray regional state as it has a thousand-kilometre-long border with Eritrea. It was the region most affected by the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia war and by the 'no war, no peace' scenario that followed Ethiopia's victory and the decisions of the Border Commission in 2002 which Ethiopia failed to accept. This led to a series of cross-border incursions, with both sides claiming to be responding to provocation by the other, numerous kidnapping raids from Eritrea, and an endless flow of refugees fleeing from national conscription in Eritrea. The closure of the border affected the economic status of the communities on both sides. On the wider level, the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian government in the mid-2000s had made a determined, and largely successful, if much resented, effort to contain and isolate President Isaias and Eritrea.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, as has become clear more

¹⁴⁷ See: Redie Bereketeab, "The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea's Road to isolation". In *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding its Regional Role and Foreign Policy*, ~Ed. Richard Read. London, Chatham House, 2009

recently, this seems to have contributed to Isaias's determination to destroy the TPLF and indeed Tigray region itself, although enmity between the TPLF and Isaias's party can be traced back to the 1970's. It would appear likely to have provided a significant element in his long-standing determination that the future of Eritrea required either a collapsed Ethiopia or an Ethiopia in which he could play the major role. In these circumstances, the TPLF believed changing policy over Eritrea certainly demanded some TPLF input, and consideration of what other changes in foreign policy might result.

For Abiy, the TPLF were always going to be a potential threat to his ambitions, both personal and governmental, once these became clear. Even after the TPLF members of the EPRDF Council had all voted for him as Chair of the Front (and therefore as Prime Minister) and the effort of the TPLF Chair, Debretsion, to become deputy leader had been a comprehensive failure, Abiy remained highly suspicious of any Tigrayan presence in government and in the upper ranks of the military and security services. This suspicion continued even after many of the TPLF leaders retired to Mekelle. They, in fact, appeared to be concerned that they might be caught up in Abiy's anti-corruption investigations into the previous government. Abiy said later that after he became prime minister, the TPLF-headed NISS had posted snipers on buildings to demonstrate its ability to remove him if necessary.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, he appeared to believe that conflict was inevitable from the time he became prime minister.

One major area of disagreement revolved around the future of the EPRDF and the way Abiy carried out its replacement by his Prosperity Party. This ignored EPRDF party protocols and regulations, through his habitual practice of taking apparently ad hoc decisions without consultation and certainly without thinking through the possible consequences. The determination to delay elections past the original date of his mandate as prime minister may, however, have been calculated. It led the TPLF into holding its own regional election and set off a series of activities that provided Abiy with an excuse for taking action over what he would claim were treasonable activities that could be portrayed as a betrayal of the TPLF's relationship with the ENDF.

The postponement of the elections was a decision that had an immediate effect on relations between the Federal government and the TPLF. In June 2019, the NEBE had warned that insecurity which had displaced 2.4 million people (UN figures) could delay the May 2020 election. A national census had already been postponed twice. Political figures reacted negatively to the idea. OFC Chair, Merara Gudina said any postponement would anger the public; Debretsion Gebremichael, TPLF chair warned postponement could have "grave consequences" as not holding the election on time was unconstitutional, adding "It means the Ethiopia government after 2020 [would be] illegitimate." The House of Representatives, however, approved postponement until August 2020 despite opposition protests. And Abiy issued stern warnings against anyone planning to be involved in "Illegal political activities and acts threatening to violate the constitution and constitutional order in Ethiopia." The

¹⁴⁸ Abiy. Speech to Parliament op.cit

government, he said, would do anything necessary to protect the safety of the country.

A few months later, in March 2020, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) said it would be unable to run the election in August because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and this also precluded setting another date. In June, the House of Federation considered the issue and formally extended the term of office of the federal and regional governments, and therefore of parliament also, up to nine to twelve months after the Ministry of Health considered the pandemic sufficiently under control. A date of June 2021 was fixed subsequently. The TPLF claimed the postponement of the election was no more than a government effort to prolong its term of office to strengthen the Prosperity Party's position before any election. It denounced the decision as unconstitutional for extended the government and parliament beyond their five-year mandates, due to end on October 5, 2020. Provocatively, it then announced that to avoid any violation of the time-frame and keep within the constitution, it would carry out its own regional election at the beginning of September which it did despite warnings by the House of Federation and the NEBE that this would be illegal. As expected, it won an overwhelming 98% of the vote, not least because by then it was able to call on a rising surge of Tigrayan nationalism in the face of Federal government actions.

Following the Tigrayan regional vote, the two sides then indulged in a series of tit-for-tat declarations, steadily ratcheting up the tension. The House of Federation declared the Tigray vote illegal; and the TPLF, in turn, declared the government in Addis Ababa illegitimate after October 5 and said it would not implement any new federal laws and regulations. The House of Federation asked the Ministry of Finance not to transfer the regular budgetary allocation to the Tigray regional government but send funds directly to local administrative bodies, bypassing the regional administration. Tigray officials declared this unconstitutional, adding that it amounted to a "declaration of war. Claiming the Federal finance ministry had retained 285 million *birr* provided by donors for social welfare programs in Tigray, they also announced the withholding of tax receipts collected for the Federal government.

As part of the policy of refusing to implement any federal decisions, the Tigray authorities refused to accept the appointment of a new commander and deputy commanders for the ENDF Northern Command based in Mekelle, and said it would only recognise the previous commander, General Diriba Mekonnen. The TPLF responded by claiming that as federal government had "no legal responsibility or power to make decisions regarding the reorganization and/or operations of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces, any decisions made thus far are not acceptable and will not be implemented." It said: "any decisions related to Tigray, such as operational decisions, leadership changes and command reorganizations and the movement of troops or armaments, are absolutely unacceptable and will never be implemented," One of the new deputy commanders, Brigadier-General Jamal Mohammed was immediately sent back to Addis when he arrived at Mekelle

Airport. Brigadier-General Belay Seyoum, appointed as the new Commander of the Northern Command, his other deputy, Brigadier-General Seid Tekuye, and Lt. General Molla Hailemariam, responsible for the handover, were told in advance they would not be allowed into Mekelle. They made no effort to do so. The Ministry of Defense criticized the regional government for restricting the army from “performing its duties”, and pointed out the deployment and mission of the army was not under the interest of any group and was bound by the constitution. The TPLF also refused to allow some troops movements, relocating units of the Northern Command to western Oromia and to the Southern region. This wasn’t the first time Tigray had prevented Northern Command reorganisation. In 2018, after the signing of the Peace Accord with Eritrea, the authorities mobilised the local population to prevent the removal of troops and equipment from the Eritrean border. They repeated this in January 2019 when the Federal government made another effort to get the Northern Command’s heavy weapons, rockets and artillery out of Tigray.

While the government was building up its forces in preparation for war, so was the TPLF. Faced by what they saw as the threats posed by Amhara claims to Western Tigray and to Raya in southern Tigray, officials spoke creating a “security fortress” and build up the region’s militia and the region’s Special Forces.¹⁴⁹ There were suggestions that it managed to mobilise as many as 250,000 fighters in advance of the outbreak of hostilities. The Federal Attorney-general claimed at a press conference in January (30.1.2021) that the TPLF had trained 170,00 militia in addition to 80,000 regional Special Forces during 2018-2020.¹⁵⁰

The Attorney-general claimed the TPLF had created its own Central Military Command in July, organising these forces into 23 regiments, recruiting both current and retired ENDF military officers. The accounts of the fighting in November suggest these figures were significantly exaggerated, as indeed were the casualty figures claimed, by both sides, during November and subsequently. It was alleged that the Tigrayan Central Command had planned to collect technical and logistic supplies for a three-month conflict in preparation for a campaign against the Amhara region and then an advance to Addis Ababa. The investigation, the Attorney-general said, had found this was to be preceded by the attack on the ENDF bases of the Northern Command which actually took place on the night of November 3. The rest of these plans were pre-empted by the Prime Minister’s immediate response on November 4 and the actions of the ENDF and Amhara Special forces in defeating the advance towards Gondar on November 4. Reports of the fighting do indicate that the TPLF did take control of the ENDF base at Dansha

¹⁴⁹<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/283-keeping-ethiopias-transition-rails> 16.12.2019

¹⁵⁰ The figures, as usual, seem to reflect some exaggeration, as the report also states recruitment for the Tigray special forces in 2018-19 rose from a previous figure of 500 a year to 5,000. All figures need to be treated with some circumspection.

<https://www.fanabc.com/english/attorney-general-police-release-results-of-investigation-into-tplfs-armed-attack-against-defence-force/29.1.2021>

[Attorney General, Police Release Results Of Investigation Into TPLF’s Armed Attack Against Defence Force](#), The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia 5.2.2021(English)

on November 4, there were no other indications that the TPLF had planned any advance into Amhara region.

Another major factor in the deterioration of relations was the growth of Amhara ethno-nationalism after 2018 and the Federal government's support for the anti-Tigrayan component in this. In part, this was a response to conflicts that had broken out at various points around the borders of the Amhara regional state, and of the treatment of Amhara in other areas, as well as emulation of the appearance of Oromo ethno-nationalism. It also thrived on the apparent opportunity, provided by the collapse of Tigrayan power (and of federal authority), to take back areas that had been assigned to Tigray regional state under the 1995 constitution. These included most of what had been designated Western Tigray and the Raya on the eastern side of Tigray.

Protests in the Amhara region, and the appearance of an Amhara youth movement, Fana, paralleled those in Oromia. Calling for the implementation of Amhara claims to Western Tigray, this encouraged Amhara ethno-nationalism and increased support for the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), set up in June 2018. Since then, this has been posing an increasing threat to the Prosperity Party's Amhara branch, being vocal in its criticism of the Federal government for failing to react to the killings of ethnic Amhara in Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia and the Southern Regional state.

The first open Amhara moves against Tigray came in mid-2018, when the Amhara administration started closing off roads from Amhara into Tigray. By the end of the year, it was almost impossible for Tigrayans to get to Addis Ababa through the Amhara region. They were being forced to take a long detour through the Afar regional state into Oromia and then to Addis Ababa. Federal police refused to take action when Tigrayan merchants buying grain in the Amhara region were robbed by local youth. Over 130,000 Tigrayans felt obliged to withdraw from other regions and move back to Tigray, though some of this was a response to attacks in the Oromo region going back to 2015/6.

In June 2019, the Amhara regional head of security, Brigadier-General Asaminew Tsige, attacked Amhara regional government offices in Bahir Dar, killing the regional president and two other senior officials. This coincided with the killing in Addis Ababa of the army Chief of Staff, General Seare Mekonnen, a Tigrayan loyal to Abiy, giving rise to claims that this was part of an attempted coup against the Federal government. In fact, Brigadier Asaminew's actions appear to have been limited to an attempt to take over power in the Amhara region. One of the accusations against was that he had been illegally increasing the Special Force units in preparation for his own coup attempt. Whether or not that was the case, the extra units he had recruited were not, in fact, disbanded after his own death.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Asaminew was arrested in 2009 for plotting a coup, but released in February 2018. He was then restored to his rank and retired on full pension before being appointed to head Amhara regional security bureau, in charge of Special Forces and militia. He was close to members of the Amhara Democratic Forces Movement, an ethno-nationalist group previously based in

As the TPLF tried to link up with other supporters of ethnic federalism in 2019, and nationalist elements in Oromia became concerned over Abiy's failure to push Oromo demands, Abiy looked to Amhara support. Given the long-term issues between the Amhara and Tigrean regions, this was easy to obtain. Abiy was quite prepared to pay the price, support for and acceptance of the Amhara 'recovery' of Welkait and indeed all of western Tigray and of Raya, not least as it would help ensure a weakened Tigray in the future. He ignored the likelihood that any such military action might set off an unending chain of attack and counter-attacks. Equally, the Amhara region, and the Amhara elite in Addis Ababa, have always been largely supportive of a more centralised system of governance than of any federation, ethnic or otherwise. This is an attitude that resonated with Abiy's views as expressed to the Financial Times in January 2019, and with his interpretation of *Medemer*, a word that might imply unity and dialogue, but which critics note, actually involves rather more instruction from on high than any realistic pretence at listening to others.

By the middle of 2020, Amhara militia and Special Forces had been mobilised and well before the fighting broke out they were deploying along the border with the Tigray region. It seems they were also well aware of the plans for an attack on Tigray and had been in discussion with the ENDF. Part of the final preparations for the attack also involved the creation of a new ENDF North-west Command, announced on October 20, 2020, to be head-quartered in the Amhara regional capital of Bahir Dar.¹⁵²

The Chief Commissioner of the Amhara Regional State Police, Abere Adamu, indeed later admitted that the Amhara regional state had "already done [its] homework," before war broke out and "deployment of forces had taken place in our borders from east to west. The war started that night after we had already completed our preparations."¹⁵³ He also acknowledged that the Amhara Special Forces and ENDF mechanized units based near Humera (presumably at the ENDF base at Dansha) had discussed joint operations. There was heavy fighting at Dansha on November 4 with the ENDF forces being forced to retreat towards Humera. Then, the Commissioner said, Amhara forces arrived to provide support to the ENDF mechanised units: "this was how the war started, this was the day," he said.¹⁵⁴ Commissioner Abere lost his job in April. He died suddenly in May.

The importance of the Amhara role in the war in Tigray was underlined on November 7, only three days after the launch of the "law enforcement operation". In response to concern in the army over the outbreak of war and even more over his agreement to involve Eritrea troops, Abiy found it necessary to make changes at the top of the army, the security services, the police and the foreign ministry. These

Eritrea, and like NaMA a supporter of the Amhara claims to Western Tigray. [Nizar Manek: "Abiy Ahmed's Reforms Have Unleashed Forces He Can No Longer Control". 4.7.2019](#)

¹⁵² <https://www.fanabc.com/english/nation-to-establish-two-additional-regiments/> 20.10.2020

¹⁵³ <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-police-chief-reveals-how-regions-police-force-guided-federal-steel-clad-mechanized-forces-to-join-war-in-tigray/> 4.1.2021

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

clearly indicated both the level of concern and his dependence on the Amhara element in the Prosperity Party and government. Lt. General Berhanu Jula, previously deputy chief of staff, an Oromo and close ally of Abiy, was promoted to Chief of Staff of the ENDF, with Lt. General Ababaw Tadesse., called back from retirement, as his deputy. Temesgen Tiruneh, previously president of the Amhara regional state, and Abiy's National Security Advisor before that, was appointed Director of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). He had been made President of Amhara regional state after the assassination of the then regional state president, Ambachew Mekonnen and other senior officials on June 22, 2019. There were also changes at the head of the National Intelligence and Security Service and the Federal Police Commission, and Abiy finally acceded to the repeated demands of Deputy Prime Minister, Demeke Mekonnen, to add the position of Foreign Minister to his portfolio, with outgoing foreign minister, Gedu Andargachew, being appointed as National Security Advisor. Both were leading members of the Amhara political elite.

More generally, there had been numerous other points at which neither side made any real effort to avoid opportunities to irritate, alarm or even anger the other, particularly in the second half of 2020, by which time it appears Abiy and Isaias had decided on a date for war.

Among the issues that raised problems between the TPLF and the Federal government were the Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission, a commission reporting to the Prime Minister with a mandate to resolve border and ethnic conflicts.¹⁵⁵ Tigrayan MPs objected strongly, arguing it was unconstitutional, and unnecessary, because the upper house, the House of Federation already the proper body to deal with such issues. It was seen as threatening by Tigray as it seemed to offer a way for the Prime Minister to assist the Amhara region to resolve Amhara claims on Western Tigray.

A complaint, frequently repeated by Federal officials, was that the growth of demands from southern nationalities for their own *killil* (regional states) was due to TPLF encouragement. One group, the Sidama, despite government delays, successfully achieved this with a referendum in November 2019 providing an overwhelming vote in favour. This success inspired nearly a dozen other groups to demand a similar change of status. Abiy himself argued that it was the TPLF itself which was accountable for 27 years of corruption and repression, and that it was largely responsible for encouraging, indeed, organizing inter-ethnic conflict across the country to try to destabilize his regime.

The major failure of the TPLF, in fact, was that it never managed to resolve the "question of nationalities in Ethiopia."¹⁵⁶ Its solution, ethnic federalism, proved unacceptable because of the way the TPLF implemented it, keeping the regional states subservient to a centralized authoritarianism. The failure to encourage realistic federal governance and the continued efforts to keep control of the regional states

¹⁵⁵ <https://chilot.me/2019/08/proclamation-no-1101-2019-administrative-boundary-and-identity-issues-commission/>

¹⁵⁶ Walleligne Mekonnen: "The question of nationalities in Ethiopia". 17.11.1969 op.cit

also counted against the TPLF' subsequent appeals to federalism. The TPLF believed that any concern about its methods of government would be outweighed, as to some extent they had been in the past, by the positives: over a decade of double-digit growth, a revived and developed economy, substantial infrastructural development, and major progress in reducing poverty and in health and education development. They miscalculated, and it was only after Abiy began to make clear his interest in a more centralised and essentially Amhara agenda in the build-up to the war against Tigray that many of Abiy's Oromo supporters had second thoughts. Abiy lost Oromo support because he failed to support demands for a greater Oromo role. There were also indications in early 2021 that he was beginning to lose Amhara support when he failed to respond sufficiently to the more extreme elements of Amhara nationalism.

Faced by Abiy's anti-Tigrayan attitude, and policies, the TPLF in effect concentrated on Tigray though it also worked to build up an alternative coalition with groups and parties on the basis of the existing constitution and support for ethnic federalism for the elections. It believed such a coalition could win any election in 2020 especially after Abiy arrested leaders of the OLF and OFC and lost much Oromo support. This was one of the factors that [made] the House of Representatives illegal after October 5. It was the TPLF's efforts to build an opposition coalition that appears to underlie Abiy's allegations that the TPLF had been responsible for all the ethnic clashes across the country over the previous two years.¹⁵⁷

By early 2019 Abiy was prepared to tell the Financial Times that there were serious tensions between the Federal government and the Tigrayan regional state, but he wasn't too worried by them: "Yesterday they were on the streets of Mekelle insulting me, but I love that. That is democracy," adding that he wanted to secure peace by persuasion, not through arms. "Negative peace", he said, "is possible as long as you have a strong army. We are heading to positive peace."¹⁵⁸

Despite this, the provocations continued. In a statement from the Office of the Prime Minister in mid-November, he said the TPLF had, over several months, sponsored, trained, and equipped 'anyone' prepared to carry out actions to derail the democratic transition, instigating ethnic and religious clashes, and referred to 'horrendous crimes' in Western Gondar, the destruction of the town of Shashemene, and the massacres of innocent civilians in the areas of Arsi, Bale, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gura Ferda and most recently in Western Wollega. In addition, it had, orchestrated an illegal election in Tigray and openly refused to accept any federal government directives after October 5, and had recalled the Tigray representatives from the Federal House of Peoples' Representatives and the House of Federation, which was a direct denial of Federal government authority.¹⁵⁹

In the two months after the Tigray election, the TPLF claimed the government had

¹⁵⁷ Speech to Parliament. 30.11.2020. Op. cit

¹⁵⁸ Financial Times: "Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: Africa's new talisman". 21.2.2019 op.cit

¹⁵⁹ Office of the Prime Minister (PMO) 14.11.2020

carried out an increasing series of petty actions against the Tigray region: blocking the transfer of a chemical spraying drone, bought and sent by Tigrayan and Eritrean nationals residing in Israel, to help the region fight locusts; stopping the arrival of two water experts from the Chinese company China Gezhouba Group Company (CGGC), who were transiting through Addis Ababa en route to Mekelle; prohibited the supply of masks for students in the Tigray region; told national and regional sport federations to cut ties with Tigray; and barred federal institutions from exchanging letters, information, providing support, or allowing participation in any Federal forum.

More serious was the House of Federation order to the government to cut off the federal budget subsidy for Tigray Regional State Council, though other officials said disbursement to *woreda*, *kebele* or city administrations would continue. In October, there was also some confusion about the disbursement of the next tranche of a 285 million birr fund under the donor-funded Safety Net program for the coming three months, though the Federal Ministry of Finance insisted it would be sent to *woredas* and *kebeles* as before.¹⁶⁰

The rhetoric magnified. A Tigray regional government statement referred to the “illegal, unitarist and personalistic dictatorship currently in charge of political power at the federal level” which was conspiring with external actors to bring the people of Tigray to their knees, and “committing the treasonous act of abandoning the country’s policy of independence and sovereignty.” It also said cutting or suspending the federal budget subsidy was tantamount to a declaration of war. Three days later, former Foreign Minister, Seyoum Mesfin, speaking on the local Dimtsi Weyane television station in Mekelle on October 29, called Abiy the ‘former prime minister’, accused him of being a traitor, of selling GERD to Egypt and of colluding with President Isaias to undermine the sovereignty of the country and its constitution, and of allowing Isaias to ‘rape Ethiopia under the guise of cooperation’. He said Abiy had made “a one-day secret trip to Asmara”, conspiring with Isaias to wage war on Tigray. Eritrean military and security officers, he said, were in Bahir Dar advising on training and organizing the new ENDF North-west Command. Asmara had also recruited and trained new forces with the aim of “finishing off the TPLF”.

On November 2, Regional President Debretsion Gebremichael speaking on regional television said that the regional government had “prepared its military Special Forces” not because it wanted war but because it needed to be prepared for the worst. He said the situation was advancing towards war and everyone should be ready. It was, he said, a war that would be waged by the Federal government of Ethiopia and a foreign power (Eritrea). He said repeatedly the Tigrayan people wanted peace but if war was waged against them, they were prepared to fight and to

¹⁶⁰ Siyanne Mekonnen “Crisis staring Tigray, Federal governments “in the eye” as army is caught in the mix, relations plummet to new low”. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-crisis-staring-tigray-federal-governments-in-the-eye-as-army-is-caught-in-the-mix-relations-plummet-to-new-low/>

The way both sides responded to the efforts of the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission to mediate, blocking any progress by setting what amounted to politically impossible pre-conditions, was symptomatic of the relationship. The House of Representatives had voted for the creation of an Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission in December 2018, and the 41-member body was established six weeks later. Headed by Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew, head of the Roman Catholic church in Ethiopia, its members included many of the ‘great and good’: politicians, among them former Prime Minister Hailemariam, and opposition party leaders, academics and intellectuals, sporting heroes, philanthropists and religious figures. The Commission was given the aim of looking at conflicts, considering opposite points of view and working for reconciliation. In theory, at least it has the power to subpoena documents, summon individuals to give testimony, and demand police support.

At a press conference on October 24, 2020, Cardinal Berhaneyesus revealed that the Commission’s attempts to mediate the current impasse between the Federal government and Tigray Regional State had been hampered by the pre-conditions set by both parties before they were prepared to sit down together around a table. The Cardinal said both sides had expressed their willingness to address the gaps between them but, he said, the politicians had persisted in underlining their own respective pre-conditions for conducting a dialogue. He refused to give any details of these but noted the Commission had received “a very constructive and good gesture from the Tigray administration” when they met Debretsion Gebremichael and his cabinet in Mekelle.¹⁶²

At different times, Abiy did suggest the TPLF should merge with the PP or join as an affiliated party, or for Tigrayan President, Debretsion, to become Deputy Prime Minister and for a number of senior TPLF members to return to Addis Ababa to work with him. The TPLF offered to negotiate on security and other national issues and the holding of peaceful elections; but refused to cancel its own electoral process or to join the PP. It said, it would support an all-inclusive national dialogue, but that must involve the release of all political leaders, and a transitional national government to oversee elections with the earlier Tigray election accepted as valid. Security should be in the hands of regions, and President Isaias be excluded from any participation in affairs. The government and Prosperity Party firmly rejected any consideration of a transitional government or a national dialogue, insisting the Tigray election must be declared null and void and the previous administration reinstated. Once the conflict started Abiy repeatedly refused to consider any

¹⁶¹ President Debretsion on regional TV. <https://addisstandard.com/we-have-prepared-our-military-of-special-force-not-in-need-of-a-war-but-if-the-worst-comes-debretsion-gebremichael/>

¹⁶² *The Reporter*, Pre-conditions impede Commission’s reconciliatory efforts, 24 October 2020 https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/pre-conditions-impede-commissions-reconciliatory-efforts?_cf_chl captcha tk =cf6ea5b4fdf726e4864f2ca5bcbfa1c17b029676-1619970175-0-AcfR-mp8ZtCD AQTKLpx6SrOin0CxSBy_N64v7LFrxC2544c2AJte8Rq82Xn5JLkW8kL7x

possibility of mediation with what he called a 'criminal clique', and demanded their complete surrender.

Given the prescriptions of his philosophy of *medemer*, it might have been expected that Abiy might also have tried to reconcile the TPLF with Isaias. The nearest he came to doing so was when he asked Isaias to talk to Tigrayan President Debretsion at the Ethiopian New Year in 2018. It was hardly a success. Isaias described his two meetings with Debretsion in the interview/speech he gave in February this year: "We met Debretsion in Zelambessa on 11 September 2018. I was not in a mood to talk to him. This was followed by another meeting in Om Hajer. I only agreed to do so late the previous night having said I would not meet him up to that point. I had only one message/question and repeatedly asked myself if I should say it or not. In the end, I thought it better to say it. I asked Debretsion, why are you preparing for war? Why? He replied, "it won't happen".¹⁶³

3.4 President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy – who is in the driving seat?

Central to Abiy's policies towards the TPLF and Tigray, and more generally in terms of internal political developments as well as regional and foreign policy, has been his relationship with Eritrea, or more accurately, with President Isaias.

Abiy's promise to accept the Boundary Commission report of 2002 in full, subsequently endorsed by the EPRDF's full Council including TPLF members on June 5, 2018, was seen as one of the most important points in his inaugural speech.¹⁶⁴ In the context of Abiy's relations with the TPLF, it should be noted that the TPLF's own Executive Committee described the decision as essentially in line with the peace principles of the government's approach for the last 18 years and said it was appropriate and timely. It did add that it should be implemented carefully "in the light of geopolitical realities," and complained the decision had been made public before being accepted by the EPRDF's Council, a requirement of the EPRDF's constitution. It warned of the need for careful consideration of implementation. Overall, the TPLF statement described the decisions as having fundamental flaws as it hadn't followed proper party procedures, and had failed to take into account the "fundamental leadership deficit and the damage visible within the EPRDF". Nor had it valued the progress of the "deep reform" agenda that the EPRDF was currently undertaking in order to solve the challenges it faced.¹⁶⁵

The significance of Abiy's decision was underlined by the related changes in Ethiopia's foreign policy, with the Peace Accord bringing the Horn of Africa's most isolated dictator back into regional circulation and, even more, giving him a leading, even controlling, role in Ethiopian affairs, and above all in events in Tigray regional

¹⁶³ Habte Hagos: 28.2.2021 <https://asenatv.com/a-complete-english-translation-of-isaias-afwerkis-eritrean-tv-interview-17-february-2021/>

¹⁶⁴ BBC, "Ethiopia 'accepts peace deal' to end Eritrea border war", 5 June 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-44376298>

¹⁶⁵ Etenesh Abera 13.6.2018: <https://addisstandard.com/news-tplf-says-ethiopias-recent-eritrea-economy-related-decisions-have-fundamental-flaws-calls-for-emergency-meeting-of-the-ruling-eprdf-executive-council-committee/>

state. Of course, an end to the 20 years of “no peace, no war”, largely driven by Isaias’ continuous efforts to destabilise Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia after his defeat in 2000 and Ethiopia’s refusal to hand over Badme and its constant exertions to isolate Eritrea, was widely welcomed, not least by the people of both countries.

How far the Peace Accord was the result of Abiy’s own thinking and how far the result of external prompting has been the subject of much speculation. Some of the first moves came quietly from religious groups. In September 2017, the World Council of Churches sent a team to see what common ground there was on both sides.¹⁶⁶ It has been suggested, plausibly, that some of the groundwork for the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was done by the United States. Ambassador Donald Yamamoto, the then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa visited Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia in late April 2018, and explored “the possibilities of an Ethiopian-Eritrean understanding, including the possible use of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to help underwrite the costs”.¹⁶⁷ Ambassador Yamamoto was a long-time proponent of bringing Eritrea back ‘into the fold of a relationship with the US and the international community; and with a career that uniquely qualified him to try to mediate between Ethiopia and Eritrea, he made a number of efforts to do just that during the 18 years of “no peace, no war”.¹⁶⁸ Diplomatic sources suggest that Yamamoto hosted talks in Washington at which both sides were represented. The Eritrean minister of foreign affairs, Osman Saleh, is said to have been present, accompanied by Yemane Gebreab, President Isaias’s long-standing adviser.¹⁶⁹

Certainly, the US, and the US Ambassador in Addis Ababa, Michael Raynor, welcomed the Peace Accord. It didn’t need the US to explain its value to both Abiy and Isaias, (though the US may well have added an additional benefit to the agreement by persuading Saudi Arabia and the UAE to finance it) not least because Abiy and Isaias believed they had a common enemy, the TPLF. There was no indication of this in the Peace Accord signed on 8 July 2018 in Asmara, but Isaias had already made his position known several weeks earlier. After Abiy’s original call to “resolve differences through dialogue” and the EPRDF’s approval in June, he publicly identified this as “Game over” for the TPLF.¹⁷⁰ He said he would send a delegation to discuss Ethiopian troop withdrawals from the disputed areas along the Ethiopian/Eritrean border that runs along Tigray, but he also needed to get some assurance that Abiy really had the political support necessary to deal with the TPLF. Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh and Presidential Adviser, Yemane Gebreab,

¹⁶⁶ World Council of Churches, “Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church hosts WCC delegation”, 3 October 2017

<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/eritrean-orthodox-tewahdo-church-hosts-wcc-delegation>

¹⁶⁷ “War resets the region”. Africa Confidential, Vol. 61, no. 24, 3.12.2019.

¹⁶⁸ Personal communication. Ambassador Yamamoto was U.S. Ambassador ad interim to Eritrea (1997–1998); Ambassador to Djibouti (2000–2003), Ambassador to Ethiopia (2006–2009); and acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (in 2013, and in 2017–2018); and Ambassador to Somalia 2018–2020.

¹⁶⁹ The Conversation, “Eritrea and Ethiopia have made peace. How it happened and what next”, 10 July 2018

<https://theconversation.com/eritrea-and-ethiopia-have-made-peace-how-it-happened-and-what-next-99683>

¹⁷⁰ “President Isaias’ speech on Martyrs’ Day”, Shabait.com 20.6.2018. Translations varied with references from “the end of the TPLF’s shenanigans”(<https://martinplaut.com/2018/06/20/why-is-eritreas-president-so-hostile-towards-his-tigrayan-neighbours/> to the “TPLF clique, and other vultures”(<https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65702>).

arrived in Addis Ababa just after the attempted assassination of Abiy during a rally in Meskal Square. They were impressed by Abiy's response to the attack and by the authority he had already shown in removing General Samora and Getachew Assefa. They reported favourably to Isaias. Two weeks later, on July 8, Abiy, at his own suggestion, arrived in Asmara - to an enormous welcome. President Isaias received an equally impressive reception when he visited Addis Ababa a week later. There was no doubt of the popular support in both countries for an end to 18 years of 'no war, no peace' and the opportunity for families to renew links across the Eritrea-Tigrayan border. Both leaders, particularly Abiy, basked in world-wide adulation. The Peace Accord signed in July consisted of five general points, covering an end to the state of war, cooperation on political, economic, social, cultural and security issues, and opening embassies, links in trade, communication and transport, implementation of the border decision, and working jointly towards regional peace and security. It offered no specifics, and no indication of how the two sides would move the situation on. It was a clear example of what has become Abiy's trademark approach: a personal action, often unexpected, to garner the headlines, without thinking through the consequences, or worrying about details, which are left to be discussed, or ignored, later. It also reinforced Abiy's own view of his capacity to charm anyone and his skill in dialogue. For Isaias, it offered the prospect of lifting sanctions which would allow him to resume what he regarded as his proper role as an elder statesman in the Horn and start on the process of replacing the regional block, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In the second place, however, it offered the opportunity for the overthrow of the TPLF. Even more, it allowed for the actual destruction of the organisation, and the possibility of making sure no Tigrayan organisation (or even the region) could ever function effectively again, by destroying its administration, infrastructure, culture, and even its population. Isaias' determination to crush the TPLF even allowed him to ally with Amhara ethno-nationalist elements against whom he had spent over 30 years fighting for Eritrean independence. Abiy was equally determined to shore up his own power base, despite his commitments to *medemer*, to dialogue, synergy, and unity, allowed himself to be carried along.

It seems unlikely that plans for the destruction of the TPLF and Tigray were worked out at Abiy and Isaias' first meeting. However, their statements seemed to suggest that they rapidly saw the opportunities for something more than a mere alliance. On his first visit to Addis Ababa in July 2018, Isaias said: "I have given [to Abiy] all responsibility of leadership and power; from now on, anyone who says Eritrea and Ethiopia are two people is out of reality."¹⁷¹ Abiy made similar remarks at Davos in January 2019, adding that he saw no need for Ethiopia, Eritrea or [more surprisingly] Djibouti to have separate armies or embassies.¹⁷² A few weeks later, Abiy, apparently referring to Eritrea said "it is only a matter of time that those who have

¹⁷¹ Abraham Zere, "Isaias out of character: Why Eritreans are getting nervous", African Arguments, 18 July 2018, <https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/why-eritrea-nervous-isaias-abiy-ethiopia/>

See also: <https://twitter.com/Saveritrea/status/1018204071109459968?s=20>

¹⁷² Davos, "A Conversation with Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia", 23 January 2019

<https://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2019/sessions/a-conversation-with-abiy-ahmed-prime-minister-of-ethiopia>

left will return”, a statement that alarmed Eritreans who saw this as the potential negation of thirty years of their independence struggle and that “Eritrea has been offered to Ethiopia on a silver platter”. This. Inevitably, gave rise to rumours that they were considering some sort of closer links, even confederation. While these have not gone away, it is far from clear whether any such suggestion can be considered practical politics. What does seem clear, is that by the end of 2018, the two leaders had come to the conclusion that their alliance would, of necessity, encompass a military solution.

For Abiy, the TPLF was a dangerous political rival — a party that had once led Ethiopia and, once he became prime minister, repeatedly flouted his authority. For Abiy, like Isaias this was unacceptable. Both believed they needed the political annihilation of the TPLF. An additional factor, in the longer term, was a requirement for the devastation of Tigray’s economy in order to allow the Eritrean economy to benefit from the reopening of the border. This was underlined by the brief but very substantial impact of the openings of the border in July which benefitted Mekelle merchants and businesses, not Eritrea, and underlined the poverty and lack of capacity of the Eritrean economy

For Isaias, though, it was also much more, a deeply personal feud. Grievances, bad blood and ideological disputes stretched back to the time of the struggle against the Derg and for Eritrean independence. And as Isaias has frequently shown, he never forgets an injury, real or imagined, however small. Abiy offered Isaias what he most desired: a way to destroy the TPLF which had humiliated him in the 2000 border war, and which had subsequently prevented him from achieving the role and status he believed should be his: recognition as an elder statesman of the region. His dislike long preceded the war that ended in 2000. In the mid-1980s, when the TPLF had criticised his ideological arguments and refused to accept his guidance and his suggestions, Isaias closed off a major TPLF supply route from Sudan running through EPLF held areas during the 1983-84 famine.¹⁷³ Tens of thousands of Tigrayans died before the TPLF was able to build their own road through to Sudan. In the last years of the Derg’s rule the two accepted the need for a tactical alliance and after their respective takeovers in Eritrea and Ethiopia, relations improved. But even before the disagreements that led to the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, Isaias had become convinced that Meles had tried to kill him by causing problems to an aircraft on which he was returning to Asmara. Meles Zenawi once told Alex de Waal: “Isaias ... cannot forgive the Weyane for defeating his unconquerable army and so he is looking to punish them. One way he would like to do this is to dismantle Ethiopia, which is proving a lot more difficult than he thought. The other strategy is to hang on until he can find enough Ethiopians who can also demonize the Weyane.”¹⁷⁴

For the second stage of their rapprochement, Isaias and Abiy signed an Agreement

¹⁷³ Tekleweini Assefa, Head of the Relief Society of Tigray, interviewed in: *Identity jilted or re-imagining identity?* Alemseged Abbay, Red Sea Press, 1998, p 129.

¹⁷⁴ Alemayehu Weldemariam, “Domestic despair shadows Abiy’s diplomatic waltz”. *Ethiopian Insight*, 18.9.2018. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/09/18/domestic-despair-shadows-abiy-diplomatic-waltz/>

of Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation in the presence of the UN Secretary General and the King of Saudi Arabia in Jeddah on September 16.¹⁷⁵ This added little to the previous accord with its seven general articles. The state of war was ended and the two countries would promote cooperation in the political, security, defence, economic, trade, investment, cultural and social fields on the basis of complementarity and synergy, develop joint investment projects, including Joint Special Economic Zones, promote regional and global peace, security and cooperation, and combat terrorism and people, arms and drug trafficking. The two slightly more specific articles covering implementation of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission decisions and the establishment of a High-Level Joint Committee, and relevant sub-committees to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

Internationally, both Isaias and Abiy gained. For Abiy, of course, it meant the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, and a significant increase in his international status, with the UN Secretary-General talking of peace breaking out in the Horn of Africa. Subsequent events, of course, have seriously damaged his image and raised questions about the applicability of the prize. For Isaias, it relieved some of the international pressure over internal Eritrean policies, though that has never really worried him. He was irritated not to be given the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Abiy, but his interest has always to be seen as a respected regional elder statesman. The rapprochement was irrelevant to Eritrea's internal development, and was never intended to have any impact in terms of encouragement of democracy or open government, it only relate to his own position and authority, and his own desire for revenge against Tigray. He has used the Accord to bring his position in the region and in the lower Red Sea back to where he thinks it ought to be, joining the Saudi sponsored Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden set up in 2020, and bringing Ethiopia and Somalia into an organisation which he can dominate. Isaias has not bothered to resolve his border problems with Djibouti but he has encouraged Abiy to make major changes in Ethiopia's foreign policy, both towards Somalia and Somaliland and the Somali Federal states, in pursuit of his own long-standing aim of replacing IGAD with an organisation in which he can play a leading role. This, and the war in Tigray, has, of course, also affected Ethiopia's relationship with Kenya, Djibouti, Sudan and IGAD, and weakened Ethiopia's regional standing and its ability to control the discussions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Isaias insisted that lifting the UN sanctions on Eritrea must be part of the overall deal, in part perhaps because of the need to acquire more arms. There have been reports that as soon as the sanctions were lifted, he was in the market for weapons, using the funds given by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for signing the agreements. Some of the weaponry displayed by Eritrean troops in Tigray appears to have been recently obtained. The UN sanctions had been imposed over Eritrea's dealings with

¹⁷⁵ Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided financial support for the deal and both awarded the two parties their highest honours for signing up, as well as providing significant financial support. UAE promised Ethiopia USD3 billion, Saudi Arabia reportedly a year's supply of oil. Eritrea will have obtained something similar.

Djibouti and its support for extremists in Somalia. Relations with Djibouti, at least on the surface, were dealt with the day after the Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement, when, at the request of King Salmon, President Guelleh of Djibouti arrived to meet Isaias in Jeddah. They shook hands and agreed to restore relations, though Isaias subsequently made no further effort to improve Eritrean-Djibouti relations.¹⁷⁶

Earlier, Isaias himself had also mended relations with Somalia. He invited Mohamed Abdullahi Mohammed 'Farmaajo', President of Somalia to Asmara on 28 July 2018 the first such visit by a Somali president.¹⁷⁷ They signed a Joint Declaration on Brotherly Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation, which covered acknowledgement of "each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity." This was followed by a summit of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia in Asmara on 5 September 2018, resulting in another Joint Declaration of Comprehensive Cooperation with agreement to build close political, economic, social, cultural and security ties, and coordinate policies to promote regional peace and security.¹⁷⁸ The three leaders also agreed to set up a Joint High-Level Committee to coordinate efforts. A second summit was held in Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara regional state, in November 2018 at which the parties reaffirmed their "commitment to inclusive regional peace and cooperation".¹⁷⁹

It was all enough for the UN Security Council to agree to the lifting of sanctions against Eritrea in November, achieving one of Isaias' main aims.

The summit in Bahir Dar, however, was seen in a very different light by the TPLF, as it placed President Isaias in the Amhara regional state. The leaders discussed the possibility of making a joint attack on Tigray on two fronts: from Amhara region in the south and Eritrea in the north. The danger was certainly clear to the TPLF and was exactly what happened in November 2020. There is no doubt that the decision to hold the summit in Bahir Dar, whether suggested by Isaias, as at least one senior Ethiopia diplomat believed¹⁸⁰ or not, was designed to send a message to the TPLF.

Although no announcement was made at the time, it subsequently became clear that the three leaders had signed a formal agreement to set up a Horn of Africa Council at the Asmara summit. This appeared to be the first stage in a plan to try to replace IGAD, an organisation which Isaias, who walked out in 2007 when it refused to accept his advice over Somalia, had no time for. One result of the creation of the Council was a request by President 'Farmaajo' for Eritrea to provide troops for Somalia after the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) leaves which it is due to do later this year. Whether Isaias agreed is unclear, though there have been

¹⁷⁶ Eritrea has yet to give up its claims to Ras Doumeira and Djibouti still wants answers about missing prisoners of war. Nor has there been any indication that Isaias has dismantled the training camp for anti- government Afar guerrillas that he has maintained in southern Eritrea for well over a decade.

¹⁷⁷ Reuters, 28 July 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idINKBN1KK1OQ>

¹⁷⁸ Africa News, "Asmara hosts meeting between Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia leaders," 5 September 2018 <https://www.africanews.com/2018/09/05/asmara-hosts-meeting-between-ethiopia-eritrea-somalia-leaders/>

¹⁷⁹ *Addis Standard*, 8 November 2018

<https://addisstandard.com/news-second-tripartite-meeting-between-eritrea-ethiopia-and-somalia-to-take-place-in-amhara-regional-state/>

¹⁸⁰ Personal communication

unconfirmed reports of some Eritrean troops in Mogadishu. He did, however, offer to train Somali troops, and the first group went to Eritrea in 2019 and 600 returned in mid-2020 after ten months training and more were sent. Somalis have claimed a total of 3,000 were involved. President 'Farmaajo' visited Eritrea in October 2020 and there has been speculation that he then agreed to allow the trainees to take part in action in Tigray.¹⁸¹ Uncertainty about the Somali election and its date will, however, affect any decisions that Isaias and Abiy want to take over Somalia.

It is clear the final details for the planned offensive against Tigray were worked out after the Tigrayan authorities announced at the beginning of May 2020 that they would go ahead with their own regional state election in September, after the further postponement of the national elections in Ethiopia.¹⁸² The timing of the offensive was chosen to coincide with the controversial US election day, November 3, when the world's attention would be on the United States. It had the added advantage of coinciding with the beginning of the harvest in Tigray, making it difficult for the TPLF to deploy its substantial militia.

The final steps in the joint planning, paralleling Abiy's internal steps in preparation for war, came in the second half of 2020. Abiy visited the main Eritrean military training base for national service conscripts at Sawa on July 18, to watch the graduation of the 33rd national service course, many of whom found themselves fighting in Tigray a few months later. President Farmaajo was in Asmara at the beginning of October, and President Isaias made his sixth visit to Ethiopia on 12 – 15 October 2020. This time he visited Ethiopia's main air force base at Bishoftu, as well as the Ethio-Engineering Group facilities there. The EE Group took over production of military vehicles for the ENDF from the disbanded METEC conglomerate.¹⁸³ During Isaias' visit, the intelligence heads of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia held an unannounced meeting in Addis Ababa. There were also reports of troops and equipment being moved towards Tigray region. Isaias ramped up his pre-war rhetoric. The outbreak of fighting was preceded by series of inflammatory statements almost designed in effect to provoke a military action. One Eritrean government statement at the end of October accused the TPLF of obstructing regional peace and stability, with its "poisonous ethnic based politics". It said the TPLF, which was quivering on its "death bed", was still holding Tigray back, despite having being told by President Isaias that it was "Game over" for the TPLF two and a half years earlier.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ In January, 2001, there were allegations that some of these troops had been engaged in action in Tigray and that over 300 had been killed. The original claim was made by Abdisalam Guled, a former head of Somali's National Intelligence and Security Agency. There have been no confirmed sightings of Somali troops in Tigray, though family members in Somalia said they had heard trainees had suffered casualties there. <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-s-fm-in-ethiopia-amid-claims-of-somali-troops-deaths-in-tigray>

¹⁸² <https://borkena.com/2020/05/04/tplf-election-decided-to-conduct-accuses-abiy-ahmeds-govt/>

¹⁸³ Overall, Abiy and Isaias held at least nine meetings in 2018-20, and numerous telephone calls, to develop their strategy. [file:///Martin Plaut/ "Timeline/ How the President Isaias – Prime Minister Abiy relationship developed" Eritrea Hub. 9.11.2020](file:///Martin%20Plaut/%20Timeline/%20How%20the%20President%20Isaias%20-%20Prime%20Minister%20Abiy%20relationship%20developed%20Eritrea%20Hub.9.11.2020)

¹⁸⁴ <https://addisstandard.com/news-amidst-heightened-tension-between-federal-tigray-region-governments-eritrea-blames-tplf-for-impeding-regional-peace-stability/>

There were reports of the movement of military hardware towards the Tigray region from other parts of Ethiopia during and after Isaias's visit. And it is clear there were similar activities going on in Eritrea. Eritrean opposition sources later provided details of some Ethiopian units being airlifted to Eritrea in October in preparation for the start of the offensive. In December 2020, former Eritrean Chief of Staff, General Mesfin Hagos, quoting his own Ministry of Defence sources, was able to give some details of just how extensive Eritrean involvement was – and it would all have had to be planned and mobilised in advance of the conflict. He said Eritrea first provided intelligence, logistical back-up and artillery support at Humera, and other areas close to the border. Once ENDF and Amhara special forces ran into problems, which they very quickly did, very substantial numbers of Eritrean troops crossed the border – on November 10 according to Tigray president Debretsion – in four areas. They participated in the attacks in Shire and at Axum and Adua, with two mechanized divisions, (46th and 48th) and three infantry divisions (26th, 28th, and 53rd); at Zalembessa, with two mechanized divisions (42nd and 49th) and four infantry divisions (11th, 17th, 19th, and 27th); and another five divisions moved from the Bada oasis, where they had been mobilized, into eastern Tigray, south of Adigrat.¹⁸⁵

Who fired the first shots?

Whoever fired the first shots on the night of 3 – 4 November 2020 is almost irrelevant, as both sides had taken up positions in which conflict was inevitable and no other option possible. Prime Minister Abiy firmly claimed the TPLF was responsible and the attack on Northern Command bases in Tigray “in the early hours of November 4, 2020” by Tigrayan forces sparked off the war. This appeared to be confirmed when TPLF official Sekou Toure Getachew, said the TPLF had launched a pre-emptive attack on the Northern Command, being forced to act by the build-up of Amhara, Eritrean and ENDF forces poised to invade Tigray.¹⁸⁶ As noted above, this was later denied.

The Northern Command was the strongest of Ethiopia's six regional commands with more than half of the ENDF mechanised units and much of its heavy weaponry. As many of the units had been based in Tigray since the end of the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea, and still included a significant percentage of Tigrayan officers, despite Abiy's changes in the military hierarchy, the TPLF believed it would be able to count on its reluctance to support federal intervention. Indeed, the TPLF thought they might be able to get active support from many of the units if conflict broke out. It had laid plans for such an eventuality though in the event these were not as successful as expected. Certainly, as the probability of conflict increased in October, and earlier, the TPLF held talks with senior officers of the Northern Command, in an effort to secure their neutrality if not their active support in case of war. It appeared to have persuaded at least half of the Northern Command to remain neutral, at least at the beginning of the war.

¹⁸⁵ African Arguments, “Eritrea's Role in Ethiopia's Conflict and the Fate of Eritrean Refugees in Ethiopia”, Mesfin Hagos, one-time Chief of Staff in Eritrea, 4.12.2020 <https://africanarguments.org/2020/12/eritreas-role-in-ethiopias-conflict-and-the-fate-of-eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia/>

¹⁸⁶ Sekou Toure Getachew, 14.11.2020. <https://youtu.be/gSPp-m6lwzw>.

Original reports claimed that the fighting started in response to an attempted attack by government troops very early on the morning of 4 November, after an aircraft carrying a special commando unit from Bahir Dar attempted to eliminate the Tigray leadership. The force was airlifted into Mekelle by two helicopters and an Antonov to try and seize the TPLF leadership at the Planet hotel. The commandos landed without a problem, drove into Mekelle, seized control of the hotel, but found no Tigrayan leaders present. They then withdrew without fighting, but after the raid TPLF forces forcibly took over the Ethiopian National Defence Force camp located near the airport, the airport itself and the Northern Command HQ in Mekelle. The commando raid allegedly preceded Prime Minister Abiy's claim of a TPLF attack on the Northern Command barracks, but there had already been some fighting in Western Tigray by then between Amhara Special Forces and Tigray troops. Another version was that the reported aircraft had been sent to Mekelle to "deliver new banknotes", with a commando guard. and that it was subsequently seized by the TPLF.

The government and the Prime Minister have also put out several versions of what happened on 3 – 4 November. The original statement from the Prime Minister's office on 4 November said the TPLF had attacked and taken over an army base. It said the TPLF had attacked the ENDF base in Tigray in the early hours of 4 November, and attempting to rob the Northern Command of artillery and military equipment. The statement said that over the previous few weeks the TPLF had been arming and organising irregular militia outside the constitutionally mandated structure. It accused the Tigrayans of continually provoking and inciting violence over the past months, while the Federal government had maintained a policy of extreme patience and caution. This attack, however, was the last red line and the Federal government had therefore been forced into a military confrontation. The ENDF, under the direction of a Command Post, was therefore ordered into action "to save the country and the region from spiralling into instability."¹⁸⁷ Later in a TV address, Abiy added that the TPLF had launched an attack which had resulted in "many martyrs, injuries and property damage" and had tried to loot military assets during attack, forcing the federal government into a military confrontation.¹⁸⁸ And two days after he had ordered the ENDF into Tigray, Prime Minister Abiy said his 'law enforcement operation' had "clear, limited and achievable objectives". He identified these as disarming the TPLF, bringing its leaders to justice, appointing a new administration for the region, and enhancing law and order.

In a statement ten days later, the Prime Minister's Office said the TPLF had committed high treason with its attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF, as well as planned, trained, financed and executed ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Ethiopia, endangered the constitutional order and that its three decades of rule had been characterized by egregious violations of human rights, corruption and self-

¹⁸⁷ Office of the Prime Minister: "TPLF attacks Ethiopian national Defense Forces Base in Tigray", 4.1.2020. https://www.pmo.gov.et/media/documents/November_4_Press_Release_.pdf

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54805088>

enrichment. Therefore, the government was now going to disarm the TPLF 'junta', restore legitimate administration to Tigray, enforce law and order and bring fugitives to justice.¹⁸⁹

Government accounts of what happened overnight on November have become steadily more outspoken and luridly detailed. At the end of November, Abiy told Parliament the 'junta' had cut communications, surrounded the ENDF units across the region, controlled most but killed some. He said: "Our soldiers who were killed were naked and both their legs and hands remained tied until our soldiers controlled the area and buried their bodies". He gave no figures but said the 'junta' had driven members of the defence force into Eritrea naked: "But the people of Eritrea gave them clothes to wear, water, food and armed it as well, and they came back and fought in Eritrean clothes. That is why they said, 'Eritrea is fighting us'. He said he himself had flown up to Eritrea along with three generals to reorganize these troops.¹⁹⁰

A few weeks later, he added further details:

"On the night of 3 November 2020, the TPLF leadership launched, under cover of darkness, what they later described, on public television, as a 'lightening pre-emptive attack' against the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), which had been stationed in the Region since the outbreak of war with Eritrea over two decades ago. Using traitors recruited from within the army along ethnic lines, not only did the TPLF leadership cause the massacre of unarmed soldiers in their pyjamas in the dead of night. They also took possession, illegally, of the entire military arsenal of the Northern Command... After they surprised and overpowered several regiments of the ENDF forces, the TPLF identified and separated hundreds of unarmed Ethiopian soldiers of non-Tigrayan origin, tied their hands and feet together, massacred them in cold blood, and left their bodies lying in open air. Never would I have imagined it humanly possible for any person to kill their fellow soldiers while asleep and record themselves singing and dancing on the bodies of their victims."¹⁹¹

A preliminary report by the Federal Attorney-General's Office in January said that on the night of 3 November, about a hundred military and police posts were attacked by regional Special Forces and militia which has surrounded the camps. The actions were led by Tigrigna-speaking brigade commanders and some defence forces defended themselves. The report gave no overall casualty figures though it referred to "17 hostages" killed in a vehicle collision, and to looting and to some killed in the camps, and to beheadings by "the TPLF group". The report said that telecommunication and power facilities had been attacked and the Ethiopian Petroleum Supply Company depot and the National Disaster Risk and Preparedness Agency stockpile of wheat in Mekelle taken over. Arms, including rockets and

¹⁸⁹ Office of the Prime Minister: "The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray: Causes and Objectives". 14.11.2020. <https://ethiopianembassy.org/the-ongoing-law-enforcement-operations-in-tigray-causes-and-objectives-november-14-2020>

¹⁹⁰ Statement to Parliament, 30.11.2020, op.cit

¹⁹¹ <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/operations-to-restore-law-and-order-in-ethiopias-tigray-region-how-did-we-get-here/>

missiles were taken from military units. The TPLF had been planning this for the previous three months, and a TPLF Executive Committee meeting ten days earlier had expected fighting to start at any time. The report's conclusions were that The TPLF had prepared its own army; sponsored conflicts for more than two years; collected weapons for war; attempting to overthrow the unity of the country, the unity of the federation and the state of Tigray; declared a state of emergency; established its own defence council; sold bonds and allowed the withdrawal of excess money in defiance of National Bank Directives; and committed terrorist acts.

Abiy's gave his own account of the reasons for the outbreak of fighting later: "No government can tolerate its soldiers and innocent civilians being ambushed and killed in their dozens, as happened at the hands of the TPLF last autumn. My primary duty as prime minister and commander in chief of the national armed forces, after all, is to protect Ethiopia and its people from internal and external enemies." Unfortunately, "the suffering and deaths that occurred despite our best efforts have caused much distress for me personally as well as for all peace-loving people here and abroad. Ending the suffering in Tigray and around the country is now my highest priority." He said, "Our operations in Tigray were designed to restore peace and order quickly". He noted that the removal of the TPLF had fuelled "unease in the international community and that concerns about ethnic profiling in Tigray and obstacles to humanitarian relief abound", but, he insisted, his government "was determined to address and dispel such concerns." Government actions, he said, were designed to restore peace and order quickly, underlining that with "the removal – for good – of the corrupt and dictatorial TPLF, Ethiopians can now imagine a future based not on ethnic chauvinism, but on unity, equality, freedom, and democracy. Moreover, the source of ethnic division that had poisoned inter-state relations across the Horn of Africa has now been overcome." He made no mention of the presence or the activities of Eritrean troops in Tigray.¹⁹²

One of the points in the Prime Minister's original 4 November statement was that the TPLF had also been "manufacturing Eritrean uniforms at the Almeda plc factory just outside Adua, and this was intended to implicate the Eritrean government in false claims of aggression." Given the realities of subsequent Eritrean military involvement in the war, and the repeated denials by the Ethiopian government, it is clear that this statement was intended to try and pre-empt and nullify any subsequent claims of Eritrean involvement. At times, indeed, the apparent attempts to conceal the involvement of Eritrean troops reached farcical proportions. The government claimed:

1. The TPLF had manufactured Eritrean uniforms to dress up TPLF fighters as Eritrean soldiers and commit atrocities;
2. Ethiopian troops who fled to Eritrea early in November were given Eritrean uniforms to return to fight the TPLF; and

¹⁹² <https://www.project-synicate.org/commentary/ethiopia-removal-of-tigray-tplf-will-benefit-region-by-abiy-ahmed-2021-02>

3. TPLF released prisoners (numbers ranged from 13,000 to 60,000) and dressed them in Eritrean army uniforms encouraging them to commit abuses that could be blamed on Eritrean forces.
4. The TPLF claimed Eritrean troops were putting on Ethiopian uniforms to conceal their presence; and
5. That both Eritrean and Ethiopian troops were wearing each other's uniforms and operating under each other's command.

The multiplicity of reports of the presence and indeed of the horrifying abuses committed by Eritrean troops, finally forced the Ethiopian government to admit their presence in March, over three and a half months after the first crossed the border.¹⁹³ It was nearly a month before any Eritrean official was prepared to make such an admission, though it was not until April 15 that any Eritrean official did so.¹⁹⁴ Until then, Eritrea while not admitting its troops were present in Ethiopia, had on occasions carefully avoided actually denying their presence, and indeed virtually implied that they were there. In Geneva, for example, in February, the Eritrean delegate described an OHCHR oral report of the crimes committed by Eritrea's armed forces as "utterly baseless. These are alien and an affront to the history and culture of Eritrea and its military establishments".¹⁹⁵

It is true that during the independence struggle, the EPLF did treat most of its prisoners relatively well, though not all. Eritreans who fought for Ethiopia, notably the Kunama for example, got short shrift, and it is far from clear that all those who surrendered (on either side) in the 1998-2000 war survived the experience. Certainly, the Eritrean troops who advanced into Irob in May 1998 to take Alitiena and outflank Ethiopian defences on the road to Adigrat, cut a swath of destruction across the region. An Irob submission to the Boundary Commission in April 2002, detailed "Killings of civilians, imprisonment, harassment, rape of women, desecration of and looting of churches, eviction of residents from their houses, destruction of houses, health centres and schools were daily activities of the Eritrean troops". 15 months later, the Catholic Bishop of Adigrat, whose diocese included Irob, noted that in his jurisdiction over 300,000 people had been displaced, their homes destroyed, schools, clinics and churches looted, either severely damaged or totally destroyed. The town of Zalembea, he said, had been systematically bulldozed and the Catholic Church there had lost eight institutions.¹⁹⁶

There can be little doubt that Prime Minister Abiy was firmly confident that his 'law enforcement operation' would be quick and easy. Even though he found it necessary to make changes at the top in both the military and security establishments on 7 November, he was quite sure his preparations for dealing with the TPLF and Tigray would be sufficient as his continuous references to a three-week action demonstrated. He had, after all, the Ethiopian army and air force (largely purged a

¹⁹³ "Ethiopia PM Abiy admits Eritrea forces in Tigray", BBC news, 23.3.2021

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.newsnw.co.uk/h/World+News/Africa/Ethiopia/Tigray>

¹⁹⁵ Response of the Eritrean Delegation to the Oral Report of the High Commissioner of the OHCHR on Eritrea. 46th Regular HRC Session Item 2, Geneva. Shabait.com 27.2.2021. <https://shabait.com/2021/02/27/response-of-the-eritrean-delegation-to-the-oral-report-of-the-high-commissioner-of-the-ohchr/>

¹⁹⁶ Patrick Gilkes, "Violence and Identity along the Eritrean-Ethiopian Border", in *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at war*, Ed. Dominique Jacquin-Berdal and Martin Plaut, Red Sea Press, 2004, p 229 - 254

year or two earlier of their Tigrayan elements), President Isaias and the Eritrean army, the Amhara region special forces and militia, and, he believed, God, on his side. Despite breaking with his former Oromo supporters and other advocates of a realistic functional federalism, he had managed to prevent any conjunction of pro-federal forces emerging to support the TPLF. Indeed, entirely confident in his military superiority, he set himself firmly against any possibility of mediation or of dialogue, deliberately rejecting the parameters of a Nobel Peace Prize and his own *medemer* philosophy to accept the views of his autocratic and authoritarian ally who was determined on the destruction of an elected leadership he hated.

The TPLF was also confident it would be able to provide an effective resistance. They had sizeable and well-trained special force units and substantial militia forces. There was the prospect, however obtained, of acquiring the use of most of the heavy weapons of the best armed units of the Ethiopian army, and the possibility of being joined by a significant element from the Northern Command. The TPLF had a belief in their own strength, buttressed by the history of their long and successful war to overthrow the Derg's military regime in 1991. Refusing to accept that its 27 years in power and its methods of governance had left a legacy of distrust and dislike, even enmity, it had also expected to be able to call on supporters of federalism from across the country. It under-estimated the sheer size of Abiy's "law enforcement", nor did it expect President Isaias to commit such a large proportion of the Eritrean army. It was shocked by the amount of new weaponry Isaias had acquired since the lifting of UN sanctions in November 2018, much of it no doubt from the UAE, and even more by the use of drones, which played a decisive role in the fighting in November.¹⁹⁷

However, the fighting in November, essentially between regular forces, was no more than a prelude of what seems likely to be the start of a long guerrilla war. Abiy has ignored the fact that the TPLF successfully resisted the Derg for 17 years in Tigray. He overlooked the possibility that military action, however described, would generate resistance, and disregarded the probability that an invasion of Tigray, whether by the Federal army, or Amhara or Eritrean forces, would cause the population, not just the TPLF, to take to the hills. In the months since Abiy first declared victory at the end of November, his policies, including the deliberate and horrifyingly destructive operations of the Amhara and Eritrean forces and the Federal army, and his obstinate refusal to consider any dialogue, have made it clear the survival of both Tigray and the Tigrayan people are at risk.

The conflict seems set to continue, with the real possibility of spreading, within Ethiopia and into the wider region.

4. Progress of the war

By Ermias Teka

¹⁹⁷ There is reason to believe the drones were flying out of the UAE base at Assab in Eritrea, not least because once the UAE had abandoned the base at the end of the year, reports of drone activity in Tigray stopped.

Introduction

There is a fierce controversy about the events that led to the war. There are two antagonistic and mutually contradictory views: one from the Ethiopian government and the other promoted by the Tigrayan regional government. They revolve around which side started the war and also the incident that led to the conflict. The Tigrayan authorities claimed that sometime late in the evening of 3 November, 2020, the federal government airlifted commandos to Mekelle in an attempt to eliminate the Tigrayan leadership.¹⁹⁸ The ‘surgical operation’ led to an intense fighting that lasted about half an hour but apparently failed to achieve its objective. The Ethiopian government rejects the accusation, while conceding that it sent planes that evening as part of a scheduled arrangement to replace old currency.¹⁹⁹

Immediately following this incident, the Tigray Special Forces (TSF) are reported to have carried out a “highly organized” offensive against many camps of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) Northern Command, at various sites in Tigray. The swift and highly coordinated TSF’s attacks on the Northern Command suggested that they were pre-planned and meticulously organised, well before the event. The Prime Minister later admitted that over 200 camp sites were simultaneously hit by the Tigrayan forces.²⁰⁰

The following day a statement claimed to have been released by the Northern Command was shown on Tigray TV, controlled by the Tigrayan regional government, which claimed that the Northern Command had transferred its allegiance to the Tigray government. It said this had happened because the Federal Government was beyond its term of office and was therefore unconstitutional.²⁰¹ The broadcast also called on other ENDF commands to follow their example. The question of how much of the Northern Command actually joined the Tigrayan forces remains ambiguous and controversial. What is certain is that, while a significant contingent of the Northern Command (primarily those in which Tigrayan soldiers were in the majority) did break ranks and joined the Tigrayan forces, many other units remained either hostile or uncooperative. The TSF was accused of ruthlessly attacking or besieging units that did not join it, including the command headquarters in Mekelle.²⁰²²⁰³ At the same time sizable contingents near Tigray’s northern border fled into Eritrea, while camps in western Tigray were able to fend off the TSF attacks and retain their mechanised divisions.

4.1 ENDF offensives along the southwestern front

¹⁹⁸ <https://eritreahub.org/breaking-ethiopias-failed-surgical-strike-commando-raid-to-remove-the-tigray-leadership>

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZG54jx-1kc>

²⁰⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoVIK9RLin0&ab_channel=OfficeofthePrimeMinister-Ethiopia

²⁰¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aijk5oiai8o>

²⁰² <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/ethiopia-says-northern-command-is-counterattacking-tigray-rebels>

²⁰³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-attack-idUSKBN28R1IE>

The federal authorities complained repeatedly that their troops had been ‘stabbed in the back.’²⁰⁴ But credible evidences from different sources make it clear that the Ethiopian army was not sitting idly by when the attack occurred. An on the record admission by ENDF official revealed that the high command was making preparations of its own.²⁰⁵ Moreover, Mesfin Hagos, former minister of defense of Eritrea, relying on sources inside the Eritrean military as well as Eritrean opposition intelligence sources, reported that “large number of Ethiopian elite units had slowly trickled into Eritrea” which were to coordinate with the North command for a swift multi-frontal attack on Tigray.²⁰⁶ Similar reports from various sources show that the ENDF had mobilised sizable contingents in the areas bordering on South and South Western Tigray several days ahead of the attack on Northern Command.²⁰⁷

But it appears that before the Ethio-Eritrean coordinated attack was executed, the Tigray Special Forces outmaneuvered them by carrying out the surprise attack on the North command momentarily causing vulnerability for the Ethiopians. However, the “anticipatory” attack of the TSF only succeeded in inflicting a temporary setback to Abiy’s and Isayas’ plans. Their prolonged and extensive preparations enabled them to quickly improvise for a counterattack whose magnitude was beyond anything their antagonists expected.

On 4 November, claiming ‘provocations’ in Soroka and Kirakir (border villages between the Amhara and Tigray states) the combined forces of the ENDF, Amhara Special Forces and Amhara militia attacked on the southwestern front, particularly in the area of Dansha.²⁰⁸ Moreover and apparently by prior agreement, the Sudanese sealed off the border areas thus preventing essential supplies from getting through to Tigray.²⁰⁹

The Tigrayans were clearly unprepared for the magnitude and intensity of the ENDF counterattack. In May 2021, an unnamed senior official in the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) gave a brief statement regarding the condition of the army and the course of the war.²¹⁰

“We entered the war before we had time to strengthen our forces, train the youth and equip ourselves sufficiently with weaponry. However, the (TDF) army encountered these challenges by using ambush and mobility tactic and faced the enemy by taking into account its strategies”.

²⁰⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-attack-idUSKBN28R1IE>

²⁰⁵ <https://twitter.com/meleshayelom/status/1373197800268238849?s=20>

²⁰⁶ <https://eritreahub.org/mesfin-hagos-eritreas-role-in-ethiopias-conflict-and-the-fate-of-eritrean-refugees>

²⁰⁷ <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-police-chief-reveals-how-regions-police-force-guided-federal-steel-clad-mechanized-forces-to-join-war-in-tigray/>

²⁰⁸ <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-amhara-region-police-chief-reveals-how-regions-police-force-guided-federal-steel-clad-mechanized-forces-to-join-war-in-tigray/>

²⁰⁹ <https://www.youtube.com>

²¹⁰

[https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/248148803754173/?_cft__\[0\]=AZXIpIKSH40MJ5B02uCNwGI3ianYT5D3JjidyRsKDEHoWmp43Os3B2YTZh00jAhmNA-AD59bBzPobhXmncR6sNZK6WLEXUi5aNi01SBSVCyTwE_rJZAU6FioaL9aaHbyEECzztK-zjp1pKbVXXdGy7FDiP7T-jgS-1R2ggTlwk5LHQ&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/248148803754173/?_cft__[0]=AZXIpIKSH40MJ5B02uCNwGI3ianYT5D3JjidyRsKDEHoWmp43Os3B2YTZh00jAhmNA-AD59bBzPobhXmncR6sNZK6WLEXUi5aNi01SBSVCyTwE_rJZAU6FioaL9aaHbyEECzztK-zjp1pKbVXXdGy7FDiP7T-jgS-1R2ggTlwk5LHQ&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R)

He claimed the TDF had grown in strength over time and attributed the revival of Tigrayan forces to the fact that they are fighting a just war.

“The leadership has reformed itself anew and the youth also flooded in once again. The novices, as well as those who had acquired experience in warfare have gathered together. (TDF), using ambush, semi-ambush and mobile fighting, is scoring victory over the enemy. The power balance is shifting. After some time, once we are completed all the necessary preparations, we will start dominating the situation and will make the transition to full blown offensives. It can be said that right now the (TDF) army is in good shape.”

Officials of the Tigray government repeatedly accused the Ethiopian army of using the human wave tactic in Dansha and subsequent ferocious battles. This is plausible. The Tigrayans were forced to give up well fortified positions, including trenches, despite having trained forces, boosted by battle-hardened veterans and ex ENDF soldiers in their ranks. Local and international observers, who had expected prolonged and entrenched warfare to last for months before any significant territorial gains were made, were taken by surprise.²¹¹ The ENDF and their allies were able to advance rapidly, capturing several towns in South-Western Tigray. By 7 November, merely 4 days after the start of the war, ENDF had taken Mai Deliye, Dansha and Humera Airport. Moreover, Lugdi, a strategic town along the Ethio-Sudanese border linking western Tigray to Sudan, fell to the federal forces, thereby severing what would otherwise have been a key supply route into Tigray.²¹²

Aware that ENDF's South-Western offensive was aimed at driving a wedge between Tigray and Sudan, Tigray Defence Forces mounted a fierce resistance near Baeker, on the hills just a few kilometres from Humera Airport.²¹³ As long as they were able to keep hold of Baeker and Rawyan, Sudan was still within the Tigrayan's reach. ENDF officers who took part in the battle of Baeker attested to the fierceness of the fighting²¹⁴. It was at this moment that the Ethiopian military reportedly decided to involve their Eritrean counterpart. Debretsion Gebremichael, president of Tigray regional state, later claimed that, in the heat of the battle, the Eritrean army carried out a blanket bombardment of Humera town from their side of the border. This forced the TSF to divert resources from the Baeker defensive line.²¹⁵ Humera residents who fled to Sudan confirmed that the town was indeed shelled with heavy artillery from across the Mereb river.²¹⁶ It appears the Ethiopian side, when confronted with the stubborn resistance which was likely to keep their offensive in check for days, invited Eritrean mechanised units to intervene. This was the first instance in which the Eritrean army was overtly involved in the conflict.

²¹¹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/ethiopias-clash-tigray-getting-ceasefire-and-national-dialogue>

²¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaPXnqtNtUw>

²¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzn4i2RSS80>

²¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzn4i2RSS80>

²¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvT4A4uLY9w>

²¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/ethiopia-unlawful-shelling-tigray-urban-areas>

With the fall of Baeker, the ENDF quickly moved to seize control of the north western towns of Rawyan, Humera and Mai Cadra, probably without stiff resistance.²¹⁷ Tigrayan sources indicated that the Eritrean army, which crossed the Ethiopian border the very next day, involved its ground forces during the capture of these towns. With the capture of Humera and Rawyan the first mission of the ENDF - sealing off Tigray from the West and Sudan - was complete. It was completed in only one week.

The TSF's direction of retreat from the western front appears to have been along the Tekezze river towards Waldibba and Mai Tsemri. They were rapidly pursued by ENDF and Amhara forces. However, before the main body of TSF's western corps, including its leadership, was able to cross the Tekezze river and head towards the better fortified town of Shire, an Eritrean contingent (possibly assisted by ENDF units of the Northern Command that had crossed to Eritrea during the initial Tigrayan attack) quickly moved South from Badme, capturing Shiraro, Asgede Tsimbla, Alogen and finally the Tekezze bridge. At about the same time a joint ENDF-Amhara contingent moved up and captured Waldibba and Mai Tsemre, thereby almost completely encircling the retreating Tigrayan forces. General Migbe, one of the leaders of TSF military corps described just how dire the situation was in a speech to Tigrayan forces, which was leaked:

"The enemy came in the direction of Waldibba; it also came through Tselemti - Mai Tsebri. About two divisions of Sha'abiya (Eritrean Defence Force - EDF) came through Tekezze from up top. They took control of Debre Abay and Aloguen; Tekezze too. It occupied the bridge you crossed and approached nearer. We had wounded among us. Leadership was with us ..."²¹⁸

Despite this, before the encirclement was complete, the Tigrayan forces managed to find an opening and evade capture to be reunited with TSF regiments in Zana. After the capture of Welqait and Humera, ENDF divisions which came all the way from South-Western Tigray joined Eritrean forces that arrived southwards from Shiraro in time for a combined assault on Shire.²¹⁹

Tigrayan forces attempted to delay ENDF/EDF advance by destroying bridges, including on the Tekezze, and digging holes at several spots along the B-30 highway.²²⁰ But that doesn't seem to have slowed down the momentum of the advance to an appreciable extent.

4.2 The northern fronts

²¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2WXHIIIE5A>

²¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPX8eceONSA>

²¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/21/slaughtered-like-chickens-eritrea-heavily-involved-in-tigray-conflict-say-eyewitnesses>

²²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-bridges-idUSKBN27X2QO>

On 13 November, the Eritrean army began powerful offensives on four fronts along the northern border. Tigrayan media claimed that 16 divisions of EDF, in conjunction with ENDF Northern Command detachments, attacked simultaneously at Rama, Tsorena, Gerhu Sernay and Zalambessa.^{221 222} Mesfin Hagos provides extensive details of the Eritrean divisions deployed through one of these fronts:

Through Zalambessa alone, the Eritrean president sent in the 42nd and 49th mechanized divisions and the 11th, 17th, 19th and 27th infantry divisions. On reaching Edaga-Hamus, south of Adigrat and north of Mekelle, these divisions were reinforced with addition five Eritrean divisions, including the 2nd brigade of the 525th commando division. He also unleashed the 26th, 28th, and 53rd infantry and 46th and 48th mechanized divisions on the Adwa front along with only one division of the Ethiopian federal army.²²³

The Eritreans used blanket bombardments of the towns, with Zalambessa shelled for 13 consecutive hours.²²⁴ The Tigrayan forces responded by rapidly withdrawing from the towns in an attempt to minimise damage to the urban areas, but fierce fighting continued nearby. Wave after wave of relentless Eritrean offensives, at several points along the border, coupled with indiscriminate bombardment of towns with heavy artillery and air raids, overwhelmed the Tigrayan defensive line, which was spread thin in face of the multi-frontal attacks.

The Tigrayan strategy appeared to be to deal with the Northern Command (more than half of the entire ENDF army) by capturing or neutralising those members who opposed their cause and co-opting those that would support the Tigrayan resistance. With its newly acquired mechanised divisions, the TSF hoped to force their opponents to the negotiating table. Initially the strategy appeared to be having some success. But the Tigrayan side counted on the much-needed heavy artillery, which they had were seized from the Northern Command, to counter the enemy's firepower. However, much to the dismay of the Tigrayan forces, the large weaponry they had amassed were neutralized before they could be used to influence the course of the war to any appreciable extent.²²⁵

The Ethiopian government claimed its air force was able to destroy the tanks and heavy artillery, while capturing those that remained, in just days after the start of the conflict. The Tigray regional government, on the other hand, reassured the Tigrayan public, during the first phases of the war that it was still in possession of the weapons, but claimed that it needed time to regroup and remobilise its newly formed mechanized division to support its ground forces. By 15 November, however, the Tigrayan side began accusing the UAE of using its base in the Eritrean

²²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfxvVIHnojA>

²²² <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/21/slaughtered-like-chickens-eritrea-heavily-involved-in-tigray-conflict-say-eyewitnesses>

²²³ <https://eritreahub.org/mesfin-hagos-eritreas-role-in-ethiopias-conflict-and-the-fate-of-eritrean-refugees>

²²⁴ <http://www.tigraionline.com/ethio-eritrean-crimes-in-za-anbessa.pdf>

²²⁵ <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/01/29/they-have-destroyed-tigray-literally-mulugeta-gebrehiwot-speaks-from-the-mountains-of-tigray/>

port of Assab to launch drone strikes in the unfolding war.²²⁶ Since the Ethiopian air force lacked precision guided missile technology to single out specific targets, its claim of effectively neutralizing the entire arsenal of the Northern Command by air force attacks was hard to credit.²²⁷ ²²⁸ Though the UAE's Assab base did indeed contain drones, only limited evidence has been provided of their use in Tigray.²²⁹ Independent investigations of the drone allegations by Bellingcat came to the following conclusion:²³⁰

"In sum, the claims made by the Tigray forces are not impossible, but so far they seem improbable. Satellite imagery confirms the presence of Chinese-produced drones at the UAE's military base in Assab, but that is all it confirms. There is currently no further evidence that these same drones have been involved in operations in support of the Ethiopian air force, though there have been confirmed sightings of Ethiopian jet fighters in the conflict zone."

Despite this, one fact remains incontestable. Regardless of how it happened, most of the artillery of the Northern Command (which constituted more than half of the entire Ethiopian military arsenal) was destroyed before it could be put to use by Tigrayan Special Forces. Of course, the TSF was still in possession of significant missiles and rockets till mid-November, which it used to strike airports of Gondar, Bahr Dar and Asmara. The apparent aim was to disable EDF/ENDF aerial attacks. However, these systems were incapable of halting the enemy advance.²³¹ ²³²

4.3 The Southern Front

In contrast to the swift advances of ENDF and EDF from the West and North respectively, the southern front remained relatively stagnant with no significant territorial gains. The forces deployed to break through TSF defensive lines included (in addition to the ENDF and the EDF²³³²³⁴) Amhara Special Forces,²³⁵ and Amhara militia, as well as Somali troops.²³⁶ Alamata, a border town in South Tigray, was captured by ENDF and Amhara forces on 16 November, two weeks after the war broke out. Even then, advancing further North against the Tigrayans proved costly and difficult. Battles around Mekoni and Chercher, which were the two pivots of attack from the south, proved indecisive. There was intense fighting that lasted several days without any meaningful territorial advance.²³⁷ Tigrayan sources

²²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58bmYD80Wjw>

²²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1cVTwQ86is>

²²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgMI2f7AA0I>

²²⁹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-64-23-January-2021.pdf>

²³⁰ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-drones-supporting-ethiopia-from-an-eritrean-air-base/>

²³¹ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1765711/world>

²³² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN27U074>

²³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58bmYD80Wjw>

²³⁴ <https://eritreahub.org/mesfin-hagos-eritreas-role-in-ethiopias-conflict-and-the-fate-of-eritrean-refugees>

²³⁵ <https://borkena.com/2020/11/15/alamata-ethiopian-defense-forces-amhara-special-forces-took-control-of-the-city>

²³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrYF3tbxyaE>

²³⁷ <https://borkena.com/2020/11/15/alamata-ethiopian-defense-forces-amhara-special-forces-took-control-of-the-city/>

claimed that the TSF was able to repulse Ethiopian offensives with its much smaller defensive units repeatedly inflicting huge losses on the advancing forces.²³⁸

4.4 The ENDF's strategy

Addis Ababa's approach to what it labelled 'law enforcement operation' was simple. It had set a daringly tight schedule and was therefore prepared to use all means, and pay any price, to take control of Mekelle in less than a month. The stories that emanated from eyewitnesses about the capture of scores of Tigrayan towns, including Dansha Shire, Zalambessa, Adigrat and Wukro, all followed similar patterns. First the towns were indiscriminately shelled with heavy artillery, resulting in huge civilian casualties and property damage.²³⁹ Similarly, air raids were carried out by the Ethiopian air force, allegedly targeting the towns rather than the entrenched TSF defensive lines.²⁴⁰

The aim seems to have been to cause a sudden, all-consuming terror and confusion among both the Tigrayan civilians and the defending forces. This was designed to cause momentary indecision and bewilderment in the Tigrayan chain of command. It was also claimed to have been used to intimidate and subsequently force the withdrawal of the local forces who were keen to keep the towns intact.²⁴¹ This was followed by, and at times coupled with, the alleged use of 'human wave' tactics. Hundreds of soldiers were made to rush straight onto entrenched TSF lines, forcing the defending troops to retreat and give up their strongholds. This is what appears to have taken place at Mai Kadra, with the Amhara militia taking many casualties. It was followed by attacks on civilians when the Amhara and Ethiopian forces finally took the town.²⁴²

These tactics enabled the advancing force to speedily capture several areas, albeit at the cost of heavy casualties and material losses. The Tigrayans also accused their opponents of deploying thousands of barely trained and ill-disciplined local militia and regional Special Forces on the frontlines as cannon fodder, to minimize the casualties of the better trained and disciplined national armies of the EDF/ENDF.²⁴³ This apparently enabled the advancing force to conserve its core strength, while simultaneously forcing their opponents to prematurely use up their firepower. In just five weeks the war in Tigray fought scores of battles, with some of the bloodiest and most brutal confrontations.

²³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/1056328604419403/posts/3732479413470962/?app=fbl>

²³⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/node/377842/printable/print>

²⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58bmYD80Wjw>

²⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58bmYD80Wjw>

²⁴² The events surrounding the Mai Kadra massacre have been the subject of conflicting interpretations.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/ethiopia-unlawful-shelling-tigray-urban-areas>

<https://www.voanews.com/africa/ethiopian-rights-commission-alleges-atrocious-massacre-tigray#:~:text=The%20Ethiopian%20Human%20Rights%20Commission,to%20carry%20out%20an%20investigation>

²⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=240bQaZb96I>

By 25 November, the combined forces of the Ethiopian and Eritrean coalition were able to make major territorial advances on all the three critical fronts. They captured Shire, Axum and Adwa from the West; Adigrat and Idaga Hamus from the North and Chercher, Mekoni and Hiwane from the South. The combined forces then proceeded to approach Mekelle from three directions, i.e., via Nebelet-Hawzien – Abraha we Atsbaha; Frewoyini –Negash and Hiwane.²⁴⁴ The forces that followed the first two lines of advance probably came together at Wukro, while Hiwane served as a point of convergence for the contingents which mobilized from Korem and Chercher. On 27 November, Prime Minister Abiy announced he was launching of the final phase of the ‘law enforcement operation’ which was to culminate with the capture of Mekelle.²⁴⁵

Despite the ENDF advances on all fronts, the Tigrayan leadership remained defiant. News of victories on several battle fronts, of Tigrayan forces repulsing wave after wave of enemy attack, was broadcast repeatedly on Tigrayan controlled stations: Demtsi Weyane and Tigray TV. They concentrated on the huge human and material losses TSF was able to inflict on their adversaries. Territorial concessions were presented as strategic withdrawals. At one-point Getachew Reda, a senior leader and spokesperson for the Tigray regional government, insisted: “Our aim is not to prevent them from taking cities, but to make it impossible for them to keep them”.²⁴⁶

Behind this façade of defiance, the leadership in Mekelle seems to have realised soon after the fighting started that they would lose a conventional war. As the Ethiopian forces inched closer to the regional capital, the TPLF leadership rapidly adjusted their military strategy and started to prepare for an inevitable withdrawal to the hills to pursue guerrilla warfare. The TSF strategy in many of the battles fought after surrendering western Tigray can be interpreted in this light. Tigrayan units sought to hold out as long as they could, inflict as much damage on the advancing army and then withdraw before incurring significant losses. Roads and bridges were destroyed to slow down enemy advances, to give enough time for the leadership in Mekelle to make preparations for the inevitable future life in the hills. News of victories started to incorporate slogans like “our struggle is bitter but short; yet our victory is inevitable.” These were versions of slogans last used during the 17 years guerrilla war that ended in 1991. On 27 November, the Tigray regional government came out with the statement that the Tigrayan forces were to pursue a ‘unique struggle’ befitting the circumstances thus cryptically admitting the transition of Tigrayan resistance to guerrilla warfare.²⁴⁷

4.5 Retreat and consolidation

On 28 November, the Ethiopian led forces began their direct assault on Mekelle.²⁴⁸ The capital was indiscriminately bombarded for several hours. As a result, 27

²⁴⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W4NFm_OfxM

²⁴⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_iLGB6L9Ns

²⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAVYDZN-3JA&t=159s>

²⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6mgwxVFtWI&t=832s>

²⁴⁸ <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/ethiopian-forces-begin-offensive-on-tigray-capital-mekelle-diplomat-tigrayan-forces-leader>

civilians were killed and 100 wounded.²⁴⁹ A few hours later the Ethiopian government announced that it had taken control of the city.²⁵⁰ Debrezion Gebremichael, president of Tigray regional state, later confirmed²⁵¹ that Tigrayan forces had indeed withdrawn from the city, apparently after discussing with the city's respected elders and businessmen.²⁵² He claimed the decision to leave Mekelle was not because of a military defeat, but to save the city from destruction by the enemy, whom he accused of looking for an excuse to reduce it to rubble.

In reality the Tigrayan leadership was far from being in control of the situation. On the contrary, it seemed momentarily to have been in disarray. Accusations were reportedly thrown around, accusing the leaders of not making adequate preparations for the war, though the signs were evident from early on. Many, even within the leadership, lamented not taking heed of the warnings and advice from those who had seen the danger early on.

There was also indecision over how to react to the mass exodus of civilians who followed the retreating Tigrayan force as they withdrew from Mekelle. Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, former TPLF central committee member, described the frantic nature of the withdrawal:

"So many people moved out of the cities of Tigray towards the rural areas following the army, including some of their families. So, we were caught in between.... Are we going to defend these people who flocked out of the cities with their families? Or are we going to fight? I mean, the army was caught in between."²⁵³

Nevertheless, fighting continued in the outskirts of Mekelle as the retreating Tigrayan army was determined to slow down its withdrawal into the highlands of central Tigray. Meanwhile its leadership sought to cut their losses and instead focus on securing safe areas, somewhere deep in central Tigray, where political leaders, who had little contribution to make in the armed conflict, could evade repeated manhunts by the Ethiopian forces.

After the capture of Mekelle, the vicious Tigray war appeared to be culminating in a defeat for the regional government and the overwhelming majority of Tigrayans who supported them. The leadership was on the run; unimaginable atrocities were being committed on civilians on a daily basis.²⁵⁴ The public struggled to deal with the unexpected defeat of Tigrayan forces and this led many to descend into despair.²⁵⁵ In addition, faced with the absence of communication equipment, the TPLF leadership remained disconnected from Tigrayan militia who had lost touch

²⁴⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-civilian-casualties.html>

²⁵⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55111061>

²⁵¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN28809E>

²⁵² <https://youtu.be/v2d5uu50S7o>

²⁵³ <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/01/29/they-have-destroyed-tigray-literally-mulugeta-gebrehiwot-speaks-from-the-mountains-of-tigray/>

²⁵⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/23021d09-5dac-4ff5-b2a9-6b040ffdc6db>

²⁵⁵ <https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/16/the-fighting-continues-a-tigray-town-reels-from-drawn-out-war/>

with the main forces in various areas across Tigray.²⁵⁶ Confused and isolated, some chose to surrender.²⁵⁷ At the same time many Tigrayan troops remained defiant and continued mounting isolated resistance in small units throughout the occupied territories. Hence local militia of Wejerat, Atsbi, Ahsea, Bora Selewa, Neksege, Mai Maedo, Tselemti kept carrying out small scale ambushes against EDF, ENDF and Amhara forces.²⁵⁸

At the same time the main corps of the Tigray Special Forces appears to have remained intact. The assault and retreat strategy that it followed more or less guaranteed that it was able to avoid incurring significant casualties. But rushed withdrawal meant it faced severe shortages of arms and military equipment.²⁵⁹ Moreover, numerous manhunt operations carried out throughout December, by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, forced the troops to constantly shift their positions. Tigray forces prioritized mobility over size and were rumoured to have temporarily halted military recruitment.²⁶⁰ Getachew Reda later recalled that, in these times, TDF units were repeatedly at risk of being encircled by EDF and ENDF contingents. He claimed they were able to successfully break out, preventing Tigrayan forces from being trapped and annihilated.

Even during the tumultuous times of December and January, fierce fighting continued along the outer peripheries of TDF strongholds. These consisted more or less of the districts of south-central Tigray - Medebay Zana, Naeder Adet, Abergelle, Kola Tembien as well as parts of Asgede Tisimbla, Abergelle and Degua Tembien.

As ENDF and EDF forces attempted to move away from the main highways, which they had secured, and penetrated into rural areas of south-central Tigray, Workamba, Zana, Adet, May Kinetal, Nebelet, Migulat Edaga Arbi and Hawzien, they came under repeated attack. The Tigrayans used sudden ambushes as well as swift attacks from the enemy's rear, using small, agile units. The attacks from the rear, known among Tigrayans as 'Qoretsa' - a military strategy the TPLF military leaders devised during their guerrilla years - was claimed to have proved decisive in frustrating ENDF/EDF offensives. These areas became sites of small scale, but fierce fighting, accompanied by massacres of civilians. With the exception of the battle of Workamba, where a well-built TDF entrenchment was claimed to have been captured by ENDF forces, other battles remained bloody but inconclusive. Meanwhile TDF units, deployed along the B-30 and A-2 highway, carried out repeated ambushes aimed at disrupting EDF and ENDF supply lines. These had a significant impact on the logistical capability of the occupying forces and also negatively affected army morale.

²⁵⁶ <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/01/29/they-have-destroyed-tigray-literally-mulugeta-gebrehiwot-speaks-from-the-mountains-of-tigray/>

²⁵⁷ <https://ethio-online.com/archives/13932>

²⁵⁸ <https://youtu.be/7gu7sFCCpv4>

²⁵⁹ <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/01/29/they-have-destroyed-tigray-literally-mulugeta-gebrehiwot-speaks-from-the-mountains-of-tigray/>

²⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/08/atrocities-insurgency-ethiopia-tigray>

By the end of December, the TDF leadership had recovered sufficiently to re-establish a more reliable command structure. It was not a coincidence that it was at this time that the exiled government of Tigray issued its first statement since its retreat into the hills. Call to arms resonated throughout the statement, largely directed at Tigrayan youth. These calls were repeated on 9 and 15 of January, signifying that Tigray Defence Forces was ready to expand its military capacity.

4.6 Tigray Defence Force expansion and the start of semi-conventional warfare

The unexpected resurgence of Tigray Defence Forces, from near extinction to one boasting tens of thousands of fighters, was probably the result of several interrelated factors. The capture and the public ridiculing of veteran TPLF leaders and the apparently deliberate assassination of some (including the former minister of foreign affairs, Seyoum Mesfin²⁶¹) caused delight and celebration in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar. The Tigrayan public, however, were disgusted. Moreover, there was widespread indignation at the atrocities, rape, looting, persecution and mass murders routinely carried out by ENDF and EDF soldiers. These events, coupled with the apathy and subtle support from Ethiopianists, crystallised in Tigrayans a sense of betrayal and indignation that they had harboured for the previous 3 years. This was exacerbated by attacks on the territorial integrity of Tigray. This included open declarations by the Amhara regional State authorities regarding the extrajudicial annexation of parts of western and southern Tigray,²⁶² as well as the occupation of a corridor along the northern border of Tigray by the Eritrean army. These developments were accompanied by programs of ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans. These entrenched the animosities of many Tigrayans and invoked a strong desire for creating an independent Tigray nation among ordinary people.

The opening of pro-TDF radio stations, disseminating reports of battlefield victories of Tigrayan forces, also served to connect the leadership with people in rural areas, urban residents and the diaspora. The re-appearance of the popular leaders like Debretsion Gebremichael and Getachew Reda (who had been repeatedly declared dead by pro-government media) alongside opposition leaders like Mehari Yohannes of Tigrayan Independence Party (who joined the resistance despite political differences) broadened the appeal for the TDF cause among Tigrayans, even if they were not affiliated to the TPLF. As a consequence, support of the public for the struggling military leadership soared and encouraged many recruits to flood into TDF military training sites.

Throughout January and February 2021, TDF operations were confined to small scale skirmishes often involving brigade level encounters. By the beginning of March, however, Tigrayan sources indicated that as the capacity of TDF rose, their forces were able to increase the magnitude and number of combat engagements throughout central and southern Tigray. Getachew Reda identified the battles of Maekel Segli, in central Tigray and Werkedino, in Wag zone of neighbouring

²⁶¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/13/ethiopia-says-former-foreign-minister-killed-by-military>

²⁶² <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-displaced-insight-int-idUSKBN2BL1C3>

Amhara region, as the first instances in which several battalions of TDF were involved in semi-conventional engagement with large contingents of the EDF and ENDF. This heralded that the tide had turned. According to insiders this was the first time Tigrayan forces engaged directly with the Eritrean army since the capture of Mekelle. Additional battles in Tselego and Dengolat were also perceived to have shown the newly enhanced military capability of the TDF.

The beginning of April saw mounting international pressure which caused concern for the Ethiopian authorities that Eritrean forces might be forced to withdraw from Tigray. According to Tigrayan sources this led to renewed efforts to crush the TDF once and for all, before the Eritrean withdrawal took effect. This resulted in the EDF and ENDF carrying out large scale offensives in southern and central Tigray; areas which had remained TDF strongholds. This coincided with PM Abiy's claim of ENDF fighting on 8 fronts²⁶³ and lent credibility to suggestions that large scale battles were indeed being fought inside Tigray. In the aftermath of the battles, Tigrayan forces claimed major victories, including inflicting huge losses on Eritrean contingents. ENDF also claimed victory. The assertions of both sides remained elusive and difficult to verify. However, the fact that the B-30 highway linking Adwa to Adigrat was closed for several days, allegedly blocked by Tigrayan forces, may show the enhanced the ability of TDF to fight in areas beyond its stronghold, as well as a corresponding decline in the ENDF and EDF's grip on Tigray.

4.7 Overall War Progress: November 2020 to May 2021

After the capture of Mekelle, allied Ethiopian and Eritrean forces sought to continue the momentum and quickly advanced on Ala'isa and Gereb Segen.²⁶⁴ The pattern of ENDF/EDF offensives remained consistent. Towns were shelled indiscriminately²⁶⁵ a few days prior the arrival of the ground troops and where the army encountered stiff resistance, massacres of civilians followed.²⁶⁶ The towns of Ala'isa, Hagere Selam, Agbe and Abi Addi were captured in quick succession.

Then, on 4 December, the ENDF mounted an offensive on Werqamba town, 17 km north of Abiy Addi, where they faced fierce resistance from Tigrayan forces.²⁶⁷ It was rumoured that the TPLF leadership was hiding in the town.²⁶⁸ After intense fighting (during which Tigrayan forces claimed to have inflicted heavy losses on their opponents) the ENDF eventually took control of the town. Yet, the TPLF leaders remained elusive. With the capture of Werqamba the road connecting Mekelle to Adwa, and through to Abiy Addi, fell into the hands of the Ethiopian forces.

²⁶³ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/04/04/Ethiopia-s-PM-Abiy-Ahmed-says-army-fighting-on-eight-fronts-including-Tigray>

²⁶⁴ https://youtu.be/_K2N5zrFgYs

²⁶⁵ <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/horn-of-africa/4036-situation-report-eeepa-horn-of-arica-no-17>

²⁶⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/bodies-torn-pieces-ethiopian-eritrean-troops-accused-massacre/>

<https://www.vox.com/22370629/ethiopia-tigray-eritrea-amhara-war-ethnic-cleansing>

²⁶⁷ <https://trending-network.blogspot.com/search/label/pWfZWuTkNak>

²⁶⁸ <https://am.al-ain.com/article/four-senior-tplf-leaders-including-dr-debretsion-are-said-to-be-in-the-town-of-workamba>

On the southern front, the ENDF contingent advanced towards Gereb Segen, reaching Samre town towards the end of December, which was captured after brief but intense fighting. Simultaneously, Gijet town, a few kilometres away, was subjected to a blanket bombardment in preparation for a subsequent attack.²⁶⁹

On the northern front, Ethio-Eritrean forces attempted to move beyond the B-30 highway and deeper into south-central Tigray. However, their attempt to capture Medebay Zana and Naeder appears to have proved unsuccessful, as the Tigrayans were reportedly able to repulse ENDF offensive around Adi Achelai.²⁷⁰ These areas remained TDF stronghold from which they were able to mount subsequent attacks. Fighting was also reported around Asgede Tsimbla, Edaga Hamus, Sasei Tsadaimba and Dengelat, with apparently inconclusive outcomes.²⁷¹

The beginning of January saw new fronts and deeper penetration of EDF and ENDF forces into previously unconquered areas of central and Northern Tigray. To the north west of Mekelle, the allied forces carried out offensives against the towns of Tsigereda, administrative centre of the mountainous district of Geralta, with the direction of attack likely originating from Ala'isa.²⁷² To the south, forces mobilizing from Maichew attacked Amba Alaje and went as far as Bora town.²⁷³ Meanwhile, Eritrean troops had already set up secure administrative areas along the border with Tigray, including Zalambessa, Irob, Gerhu Sirnay, Rama and Shiraro.²⁷⁴ However, rural areas and towns between this buffer zone and the B-30 highway southwards remained under the control of the TDF and hostile Tigrayan militia. The Tigrayans targeted crucial supply routes along Rama-Adwa and Zalambessa-Adigrat roads. Intending to nullify these intermittent attacks, EDF offensives were launched from Kerseber town, between Adigrat and Zalambessa, to areas as far as Assimba Mountains. Similar offensives were carried out against Debre Damo and Bizet.²⁷⁵

Ethio-Eritrean forces soon discovered that holding towns far from the highway was far more difficult than capturing them. The Tigrayans kept targeting supply routes and mounting unexpected attacks against the towns themselves, only to withdraw before supporting units arrived from nearby garrisons. Consistent with this pattern, the TDF launched a series of attacks on several towns of northern and central Tigray. As such, mid-January offensives by the TDF on Daero Hafash, Edaga Arbi, Mai Kinetel, Nebelet and Hawzen appear to have been successful and the Tigrayans were even able to occupy several of them, even if they were only held temporarily. Among these offensives, Daero Hafash, near Axum, stands out as one involving the most intense and lengthy fighting. Tigrayan sources claimed to have inflicted upwards of 4,000 casualties on EDF/ENDF forces.²⁷⁶

²⁶⁹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-42-31-December-2020.pdf>

²⁷⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/261522124370013/posts/1020767315112153/?app=fb>

²⁷¹ https://youtu.be/dUwUmD_A260

²⁷² <https://www.facebook.com/110943837074039/posts/243407753827646/?app=fbl>

²⁷³ https://youtu.be/UzVuL_reTM

²⁷⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/100009762090628/posts/1358183594517031/?app=fbl>

²⁷⁵ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-85-16-February-2021.pdf>

²⁷⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=400214517874452>

Fighting intensified throughout February. Ethio-Eritrean forces continued to mount attacks on the mountainous areas of central Tigray. Conversely, TDF kept targeting the enemy's supply routes and carrying out ambushes, choosing spots where the advancing force would be vulnerable. On the central front, rural areas around Nebelet remained a focal point of repeated clashes between the TDF and EDF, with the former persistently mounting surprise attacks, involving 'Qoretsa' maneuvers, to make sustained occupation untenable.

With the approach of the annual "Lekaitit 11" celebration (18 February 2021), commemorating the start of Tigrayan armed struggle, the TDF leadership planned a series of high-profile attacks in an attempt to score victories that would reinvigorate popular support for the resistance. Consequently, on February 8th, Tigrayan forces carried out an operation named after the late Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin around Juamare, Kola Tembien. After a series of battles in the surrounding area, the TDF claimed to have defeated a battalion sized contingent of Ethio-Eritrean forces which had been drafted into the area.²⁷⁷

By mid-February, even more significant battles were fought in Mai Kinetel, Gijet and Samre, lasting several days. In the aftermath of the fighting, Tigrayan forces temporarily recaptured the towns and allegedly inflicted heavy losses on EDF/ENDF before withdrawing to the mountains.²⁷⁸ In Mai Kinetel alone, Tigrayan forces claimed to have killed or captured more than 2,000 EDF soldiers. This was the first time since November when Tigrayan forces had faced such sizable enemy contingent. It appears to have served as a reversal of fortune for the EDF/ENDF while emboldening the Tigrayan side. In the aftermath of the battle, a TDF statement said: "the defeat showed that the Eritrean army is not as formidable as is being claimed to be."²⁷⁹ To friend and foe alike, it was presented as evidence that the TDF was capable of moving beyond mounting guerrilla attacks and could openly engage the Eritrean army and come out on top.

On 20 February, the government of Tigray issued a statement listing its terms for peace negotiation. These included the unconditional withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara forces from Tigray; an independent investigation of alleged atrocities committed in Tigray and a vehement denunciation of the Tigray interim administration, appointed by the government in Addis Ababa.²⁸⁰ More than anything, the statement revealed the Tigrayans belief in the ability of their military to maintain a sustained resistance that would be sufficient to force negotiation on their own terms. That, at least, was what the Tigrayan authorities wished the world to believe. The fact that the ENDF was by this time reportedly digging trenches around Mekelle, moving into a defensive posture, appeared to affirm a gradual shift in the military strength among the antagonists.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/902161903930979/?app=fb>

²⁷⁸ <https://youtu.be/DITmA2gHg3M>

²⁷⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/1372380593106357/?app=fbl>

²⁸⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/282348198530030/posts/3663465353751614/?app=fbl>

²⁸¹ <https://martinplaut.com/2021/02/16/situation-report-eepe-horn-no-85-16-february-2021/>

March saw evidence of the enhanced of military capability of TDF. Multiple semi-conventional battles took place involving several brigades from both sides, with correspondingly high human casualties. During the first week of March, major offensives were carried out around Samre, Bora and Ofla, by the combined armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and supported by Amhara regional forces, in an attempt to overwhelm southern Tigray and weaken TDF presence there.²⁸² The fighting provided evidence of the involvement of Eritrean forces in southern Tigray. This coincided with reports of Ethiopian forces being redeployed to central and southern Ethiopia, to head off an increased threat from the Oromo Liberation Front. The ENDF was gradually yielding Tigray to Eritrea while moving its forces in Oromia. After several days of fighting, it appears that TDF units were able to carry out successive ambushes as well as entrenched engagements in the area. As a result, they wore down enemy attacks, neutralising thousands of EDF/ENDF soldiers in the process. This meant an increased presence of TDF in southern Tigray, which led to their subsequent infiltration attacks into neighbouring Amhara territory.

Towards the middle of March two major infiltration-type offensives were carried out by the TDF deep into Amhara territory. On March 18th Tsata town, an administrative center in the Wag Himra Zone of the Amhara region, was attacked by TDF infiltration units.²⁸³ Besides aiming to acquire much needed military equipment and supplies, while simultaneously weakening Amhara forces in the area, the TDF leadership also appears to have intended to make a statement that it was now a force to be reckoned with.

By the beginning of April, Ethio-Eritrean forces carried out huge operations described as ‘once and for all’ attacks.²⁸⁴ Several divisions of EDF/ENDF were mobilised in almost all fronts of central and southern Tigray. The Tigrayan media house, Demtsi Weyane, reported extended fighting around Endabaguna, Seleh Leha, Zana, Hawzien, Maikinetal, Edaga Arbi and Wojerat.²⁸⁵ The multi-frontal Ethio-Eritrean offensive, which involved mechanised divisions and aerial support, continued in full force until the middle of April. Both sides claimed to have achieved major victories, which is difficult to verify. However, it is evident that the Ethio-Eritrean forces terminated the operation before achieving their main objective – the complete eradication of the TDF. Contrary to ENDF claims, several videos of large contingents of TDF units celebrating victory, as well as mobilizing for another operation, were released on social media.²⁸⁶ This was followed, on April 26th, by another Tigrayan offensive against Nirak, located inside the Amhara region near Abergelle, with TDF infiltration units reportedly destroying a contingent of Amhara Special Forces that had camped in the area.²⁸⁷

²⁸² <https://nitter.fdn.fr/MapEthiopia/status/1370442748185038853#m>

<https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/445785693505490/?app=fbl>

²⁸³ <https://www.facebook.com/tmhtv/videos/171079998066137/?app=fbl>

<https://www.bbc.com/amharic/news-56481575.amp#click=https://t.co/b2BJkcieb8>

²⁸⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/tmhtv/videos/3650642208317718/?app=fbl>

²⁸⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/464956238039523/?app=fbl>

²⁸⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5ki5yyFSfY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgrGcIkj6BQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mo60DcgRPSc>

²⁸⁷ <https://eritreahub.org/tigray-war-independent-report-of-the-battle-for-nirak>

During the first week of May, TDF infiltration units are reported to have carried out a limited offensive against Eritrean positions near Gerhu Sirnay town, bordering on Eritrea.²⁸⁸ The offensive was similar to the ones undertaken inside the Amhara region. TDF activities in April and May suggests that, beyond attacks on supply highways, the Tigrayan resistance is likely to continue such limited scale offensives targeting weak spots of its opponents. At the same time, it appears unlikely that Tigrayan forces will seek to confront EDF/ENDF units head-on and try to make territorial advances any time soon.

4.8 Conclusion

It has now been more than six months since the start of the Tigray war and all the available evidence shows it's unlikely to end soon. At the start of the war, faced with relentless attacks by the numerically superior allied forces of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Tigrayan Special Forces were forced to withdraw from major towns and retreat to the mountains, to conduct a guerrilla war. Subsequent campaigns, in December and January, by the EDF/ENDF into TDF strongholds of central and southern Tigray failed to crush Tigrayan resistance.

After barely scraping through its worst period, however, the Tigrayan resistance grew in strength.²⁸⁹ Numerous horrifying atrocities committed by armies of the EDF, ENDF and Amhara forces, as well as the annexation of Tigrayan territory, and the deliberate destruction and looting of public property, enraged the Tigrayan public against the federally appointed interim administration. This period has also seen the emergence of the TDF as a truly national resistance movement, not tied to any particular political party. Its status has been enhanced by the fact that TPLF veterans²⁹⁰ and opposition leaders joined its ranks,²⁹¹ as did large number of Tigrayan youth.²⁹² They were supported by the emergence of a pan-Tigrayan, and highly vocal diaspora²⁹³ which was able to consolidate and mobilise the Tigrayan public. These factors served to transform the resistance into an all-inclusive people's war.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian army was facing a significant decline in its operational capability. With the Northern Command - its most potent segment - neutralized, the Ethiopian national army was at a disadvantage from the beginning.²⁹⁴ In addition, thousands of Tigrayan members of the ENDF, were swiftly side-lined or imprisoned by the Ethiopian government because of their ethnicity, without sufficient preparations for their replacement. Considering the fact that the Tigrayans were the most experienced members of the military, it is obvious that this would take a

²⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7eAgtd3Iq4>

²⁸⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/08/atrocities-insurgency-ethiopia-tigray>

²⁹⁰ <https://borkena.com/2020/12/11/general-tsadkan-gebretensae-facing-arrest-warrant-over-treason/>

²⁹¹ <https://youtu.be/ZzpH5owidXY>

<https://www.facebook.com/VoT2025/videos/3851636794893463/?app=fbl>

²⁹² <https://youtu.be/8rzX4RaFbK0>

²⁹³ <https://columbianewsservice.com/2020/12/16/conflict-in-ethiopia-draws-tigray-diaspora-into-activism/>

²⁹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoVIK9RLin0>

significant toll on the ENDF's military capacity. Moreover, the brutal November campaign, where the Ethiopian command pursued a strategy that prioritized the swift capture of Mekelle over operational efficiency, had resulted in heavy casualties and the loss of essential equipment.²⁹⁵ Subsequent ambitious, but ill-conceived, campaigns into central Tigray, which attempted to completely eliminate the TPLF led resistance, coupled with TDF's adept utilization of guerrilla warfare, resulted in the ENDF losing some of its most experienced troops.²⁹⁶ With most of its divisions tied up in Tigray, the rise of insurgency movements, like the Oromo Liberation Army²⁹⁷ and Gumuz Liberation Front²⁹⁸ in the rest of Ethiopia, as well as a border conflict with Sudan, compelled the Ethiopian government to be increasingly reliant on Eritrean forces in its Tigray campaign.

Eritrean forces were heavily involved in the Tigray war right from the start. Tigrayan sources had claimed that as early as the beginning of November, more than half of the EDF's infantry divisions were already deployed on Tigrayan soil. After the fall of Mekelle, the Eritrean army annexed a part of northern Tigray instituting military administrations around Zalambessa, Rama, Irob, Gerhu Sirnay and Shiraro. Moreover, several divisions of EDF, including the infamous 525 commando division, were deployed alongside ENDF units, in ongoing campaigns into central Tigray.²⁹⁹ Numerous reports from residents illustrate that few, if any, areas of central and northern Tigray had not been visited by EDF contingents. As early as December, a permanent Eritrean presence was reported in several Tigrayan towns including, among others, Wukro, Adigrat, Adwa, Shire and Nebellet.³⁰⁰

By the beginning of February, TDF affiliated sources were repeatedly insisting that two thirds of the Ethiopian national army had been 'neutralized' and that most of the fighting in northern and central Tigray was against EDF units.³⁰¹ It was also claimed that, if the Eritreans were to withdraw, the ENDF alone would be unable to contain the Tigrayan Defense Forces.³⁰² With mounting international pressure for the Eritrean army to withdraw from Tigray, reports started to emerge that the Eritrean army had started to wear ENDF uniform, with the aim of eventually merging with the Ethiopian army.³⁰³

Meanwhile, public opinion in the rest of Ethiopia, beyond the current war, remained finely divided over the legitimacy and course of the conflict. The sharp and seemingly irreconcilable difference of opinion among advocates of the two sides appears to align with their respective attitude towards, and identification with, the previous history of Ethiopia, as well as their views of the best model of governance

²⁹⁵ <https://africanarguments.org/2021/02/tigray-one-hundred-days-of-war/>

²⁹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/04/ethiopias-pm-says-military-fighting-difficult-and-tiresome-guerilla-war>

²⁹⁷ <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/27/ethiopias-vicious-deadlock/>

²⁹⁸ <https://borkena.com/2021/01/12/benishangul-at-least-60-civilians-mostly-women-children-killed/>

²⁹⁹ https://youtu.be/z_J5lkRF5kA

³⁰⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-other-nations-involved-in-the-war-in-tigray/a-56891431>

³⁰¹ <https://youtu.be/zWz5EIqRcag>

³⁰² <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/12/africa/tigray-axum-aid-blockade-cmd-intl/index.html>

³⁰³ <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/10/407813/World/Africa/Protest-in-South-Africa-over-conflict-in-Ethiopias.aspx>

for the country to follow. Many of the most vocal advocates of the multinational federation denounced Abiy's attempt to crush Tigray and his alliance with President Isaias. This explains the firm support by hard core federalists among the Oromo for Tigrayan resistance, despite the TPLF's previous antagonism towards the OLF. This has resulted in a strategic, if unlikely Oromo alliance, with Tigrayans.³⁰⁴

However, many federalists had been embittered by the behavior of the EPRDF, and TPLF's role within it. As a result, many have remained perceivably apathetic about Tigray's suffering and have not involved themselves in the conflict. Somali nationalists, as well as those of Afar and Southern nationalities, fall into this category. While the Special Forces of almost all the regional states participated in the war on the side of the federal government, it would be wrong to confuse their role with the position the elites of their respective nationalities towards the Tigray war. All in all, because of the previous experience that ethnic nationalists had of the TPLF, some, who might otherwise have supported Tigrayan resistance, have remained divided on the issue. Ethiopianists, however, apart from a small minority, have remained strong supporters of the government's crusade against Tigray.

On the other hand, the people's support for the federal government, hadn't translated well when it came to providing recruits for the national army, or at least not as much as the federal government had wanted it. While it could be argued that there was good response to government's calls for volunteer recruits during the first few months, as the war dragged on, and as gossip of the national army's high casualty rates or the difficulty of fighting against Tigrayan insurgency begun to spread among the population, the number of volunteers started to dwindle while the governments call of arms began to appear desperate and frequent. Abiy Ahmed repeatedly criticized the youth for preferring to 'fight on Facebook' while the country was in desperate need of new conscripts.³⁰⁵

With the failure of the April offensives to decisively defeat the Tigrayan resistance,³⁰⁶ it has become clear that the Tigray war is poised to become a protracted conflict, threatening to sink the Horn into instability.³⁰⁷ It is apparent that over the past couple of months, the operational capability of TDF has grown significantly and has now reached a point where it is deploying several brigades in its contacts with EDF/ENDF units. It appears capable of successfully defending its strongholds in the mountainous central and southern Tigray.³⁰⁸ Moreover, its ambushes targeting the A-2, B-20 and B-30 highways have severely constrained the supply routes of EDF/ENDF armies, making it increasingly difficult for its opponents to sustain a prolonged occupation of the region.

³⁰⁴ <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/10/407813/World/Africa/Protest-in-South-Africa-over-conflict-in-Ethiopia.aspx>

³⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ3XyYI2oQo>

³⁰⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/214420826713179/?app=fbl>

³⁰⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopia-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate>

³⁰⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCSgBYuObRo>

By May 2021 the rural areas of central and southern Tigray below A-2 and B-30 highway, as well as smaller towns found farther from the main roads, appeared to be firmly under TDF control. The Eritrean forces, on the other hand, have maintained a firm grip over the larger towns in central Tigray found along the B-30 and A-2 highways. Towns like Maikinetal, Werqamba, Abiy Addi and Nebelet, which are further south of the highway, were also under EDF control.³⁰⁹ However, as these towns are exposed to repeated TDF attacks, it will be difficult for the Eritreans to sustain control over them in the coming months, especially during the rainy season, which begins in July. ENDF units seem content with administering the bigger towns south of Mekelle found along the A-2 highway. Western Tigray, beyond Tekeze river, will probably remain under the control of Amhara forces³¹⁰ and TDF attacks in these areas, especially aimed at sustained territorial advances, appear unlikely in the near future.

[Note: This chapter was written prior to the launching of Operation Alula³¹¹ which transformed the war in just ten days, from 18 June to 28 June 2021, with the Tigrayans re-capturing Mekelle and a string of other towns and villages.]

5 The Ethiopian national context

Author's name withheld

Other chapters in this collection discuss detailed aspects of the war in Tigray: its outbreak, conduct and devastating impact within the regional state. This chapter broadens the focus to look at other political and conflict dynamics in Ethiopia and their articulation with the war in Tigray. It focuses primarily on politics in the Oromo and Amhara arenas. There has been a strong tendency before and after the outbreak of fighting in November 2020 to treat the political divergence – and now war – between the federal and Tigray governments as somehow “separate” and separable from other dynamics of the political evolution of Ethiopia. There are political and analytical consequences to this approach.

5.1 Contextualising the war in Tigray

The government narrative from Addis Ababa since the current Prime Minister came to power in April 2018 sought to separate the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from other political actors. It attributed responsibility for the ills of “27 years of darkness”³¹² to the TPLF, not to the wider ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) of which it was a member. It cast TPLF leaders (and not their EPRDF colleagues still in government) as criminals and accused them of destabilising the “transition.” The narrative has proved clear, effective and popular,

³⁰⁹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-100-10-March-2021.docx.pdf>

³¹⁰ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-16/ethiopia-s-amhara-seize-disputed-territory-amid-tigray-conflict>

³¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Alula. This was named after the general who led Ethiopian forces in battles against Ethiopia's enemies in the nineteenth century, and is considered the greatest military leader Tigray produced.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ras_Alula#Battle_of_Adwa

³¹² PM Abiy, a few months into his premiership, cited in <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/04/30/move-fast-and-break-things/>

tirelessly reiterated on all of the media sources easily available to Ethiopia's public.³¹³ Since November 2020 the government and its supporters refer to the war as a local policing or "law and order" operation against a small group of "treasonous" lawbreakers. Even in the context of the rout of its military forces in late June, the government persisted in its "law and order" operation claims.³¹⁴ The approach has been designed to counteract an understanding of the war as driven by politics, or tractable only to a political – not to a policing or military – solution, as most observers believe. The formal proscription by Ethiopian lawmakers on 6 May 2021 of the TPLF (together with what the government refers to as "OLF *Shanee*"³¹⁵) as a terrorist organisation serves to reinforce this ringfencing strategy. It remained in force at the end of June 2021.

Many analysts have fallen in with this approach, treating the "Tigray conflict" not as civil war but as independent of a wider crisis of the Ethiopian state. Ethiopia is large, diverse and complicated and one way to try to unpick and convey this complexity has been to distinguish its different conflicts for separate analysis. But something important is lost in this way. An understanding of the interlinkages with wider disputes and developments is important to capture a sense of the complex and shifting motivations of the protagonists in the war, and of their myriad supporting cast members, many of whom operate across the broader political canvases of Ethiopia, the Horn and beyond. The war itself, and the polarisation and propaganda associated with it, now have an influence on Ethiopian political developments including the June election: rhetoric from late May 2021 about "foreign interference", for instance, provided politically useful grist to the Ethiopian sovereignty mill,³¹⁶ activating powerful historical echoes.³¹⁷ It was supremely well-timed to galvanise support a month before national polls. Examination of the wider Ethiopian context, then, helps illuminate the scope and intricacy of the challenges that confront a sustainable resolution of the bloody conflict in Tigray. It also illuminates the scale of what may be at stake, far beyond the borders of Tigray itself.

³¹³ including government broadcasters ETV, Walta, Fana, and the "opposition" ESAT channel, which is closely associated with Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (Ezema). Established in the diaspora by critics of the government in April 2010, the ESAT channel was re-established as a public broadcaster in Ethiopia in May 2021, under the directorship of former Patriotic Ginbot 7 (PG7) secretary, Andargachew Tsige, <https://borkena.com/2021/05/09/esat-declared-a-public-media-with-andargachew-tsige-as-director/>. A dispute within the organisation and amongst well known ESAT journalists in mid-2019 (over financial ownership and administration, links to PG7, and editorial policy) saw the establishment of the alternative Ethio-360 media in Washington DC in June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUmt-c94AUw>. This is a division which has produced a rich seam of divergent perspectives and mutual criticism. In August 2017, a pro-Tigray *Horn Affairs* author accused ESAT of anti-Tigray hate speech, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ESAT> calling it "the voice of genocide" <https://hornaffairs.com/2017/08/23/esat-radio-television-voice-genocide/>.

³¹⁴ PMO statement on 28 June 2018, claiming to be responding to a Tigray interim administration call to stand down, and following military defeats in central Tigray. The interim administration had by that time fled to Addis Ababa. See <https://www.facebook.com/login/?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2F541629952535552%2Fposts%2F4549753051723202%2F%3Fsfnsn%3Dmo>

³¹⁵ There is no organisation or grouping which refers to itself in this way, and many Oromo observers regard this terminology as dismissive if not derogatory. The Oromo language word *Shanee* refers to a committee which supports the *Gadaa* system. Government sources seem to use the term to refer to the self-styled Oromo Liberation Army, OLA, the name which is used here.

³¹⁶ Horn Observer, 18 May 2021, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/946/Ethiopian-government-stands-up-to-foreign-interference-in-Tigray-statement>

³¹⁷ "Hands off Ethiopia" <https://borkena.com/2021/05/21/hands-off-ethiopia-protest-in-the-capital-addis-ababa/> is a direct echo of the 1935 anti-fascist movement protesting Mussolini's occupation, see Joseph Fronczak, April 2015 <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article-abstract/39/2/245/468665?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

5.2 A threat to Ethiopia's integrity?

As “the war continues, destabilising Ethiopia and the wider region” so the perception has grown that it “is a cruel drain on the resources and population of Ethiopia and its neighbours [and] a potential threat to the entire region.”³¹⁸ As Martin Plaut has noted in the introduction to this collection, a group of senior US diplomats warned in late October 2020 that “fragmentation of Ethiopia [...] would be the largest state collapse in modern history.”³¹⁹ As the war ground on beyond six months Ethiopia began to draw new and invidious international comparisons. US Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman, told *Foreign Policy* in May 2021 that the conflict has the potential to spiral into a full-fledged regional crisis: “If the tensions in Ethiopia would result in a widespread civil conflict that goes beyond Tigray, Syria will look like child’s play by comparison.”³²⁰ Also in May 2021, Theodore Murphy the Africa Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations said “if the Ethiopian government can’t find a way out of this war, and we also understand that the war can’t be won militarily, it is akin to a sort of Afghanistan for the Ethiopian government. But it’s one that they can’t walk away from. It is just slowly leeching away at Ethiopia’s wealth and international standing, and of course with an incredible human cost.”³²¹ Ethiopia’s government, meanwhile, vigorously resisted this characterisation of the situation.

But on 28 May 2021 Ethiopia’s ruling Prosperity Party (PP) issued a statement that seemed abruptly to acknowledge the severity of the crisis facing the whole country, if only as a further reason to reject political negotiations: “The captains of a ship can negotiate internally and compete only as long as the ship survives. There can never be rights, dialogue, debate, negotiation or competition when the ship is sinking. It is the same when it comes to the affairs of a country.”³²² The statement, with its glossy accompanying video, seems to have been intended as an electoral appeal – seeking to draw on the well of Ethiopian nationalism in defence of a nation threatened. But it also begs the obvious questions: is the Ethiopian ship sinking, and if so, how, and why, and how did we get here? This paper briefly reviews key political and conflict dynamics behind the “vicious deadlock” in Ethiopia.³²³ It reviews conflict trajectories and risks beyond Tigray, focusing on shifting patterns in other parts of Ethiopia. It depicts the depth and extent of the differences of opinion between Ethiopia’s different political actors, and amongst those who observe and analyse them.

Truth has been a casualty of the polarisation of politics in Ethiopia in a context of limited information. This is a problem only exacerbated by insecurity, by acute constraints on travel during a pandemic, and by pressure and limitations on

³¹⁸ Martin Plaut in the introduction to this collection.

³¹⁹ US Institute for Peace (USIP) Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, ‘Final Report and Recommendations,’ 29 October 2020, <https://www.usip.org/press/2020/11/statement-ethiopia-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea-arena>; <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/final-report-and-recommendations-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea>

³²⁰ <https://martinplaut.com/2021/04/27/u-s-africa-envoy-ethiopia-crisis-could-make-syria-look-like-childs-play/>

³²¹ Theodore Murphy, ECFR, IPSI Panel Discussion “Ethiopia: Too big to fail. What role for the international community in the Tigray Crisis?” 26 May 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/eventi/evento/ethiopia-too-big-fail-what-role-international-community-tigray-crisis#FORM>

³²² Statement of the Executive Committee of the Prosperity Party, 28 May 2021, <https://fb.watch/5MHS2Y0q8i/>

³²³ René Lefort ‘Ethiopia’s vicious deadlock,’ *Ethiopia Insight*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/27/ethiopias-vicious-deadlock/>

journalistic investigation.³²⁴ Anthony Shaw in this volume notes the evolution of two diametrically opposed accounts – contrasting truths - of the war in Tigray, and the same is even more true of wider events in Ethiopia, making the job of international observers and diplomats particularly challenging. In late May 2021, Crisis Group’s Will Davison commented: *“the tragedy for me is that whether we take the Tigray conflict, or the situation in Metekel zone (and this is just the current crises), or the Wollegas, or the situation in South Wollo and around Atayé in Oromia zone in Amhara, whether we take the build-up to the war and the outbreak of the war, Hachalu’s assassination, etc. etc., all of these events need better reporting, they all need exposing - like all of these massacres that are occurring, Amhara civilians, other civilians, in Oromia and Metekel. Who are the perpetrators, who are the victims, who’s funding the perpetrators? It all needs to be exposed properly. It is a cliché but it is in this darkness that evil flourishes. [Lack of exposure] facilitates all of this murky violent political activity.”*³²⁵

5.3 Conflict and the rule of law

Observers across the political spectrum seem to agree that Ethiopia has become more violent and unstable in recent years, and that the rule of law has disintegrated, or been allowed to disintegrate, in many parts of the country. The extent of the security and governance challenge was brought into focus when Ethiopia’s National Election Board (NEBE) Chairperson reported in April 2021 that, of 45,000 polling stations expected to be opened in January 2021,³²⁶ only half were operational, and that only 200,000 voters had registered across Addis Ababa municipality.³²⁷ After an extension of the voter registration period by several weeks and a strong governmental push, “at least 36 million” voters were reported to have been registered, still “at least 10 million short of what officials were targeting” according to the BBC.³²⁸ Significant parts of the country were excluded from the election on 21 June 2021, because of security issues,³²⁹ and defective ballot printing logistics. A further area did not vote pending the conduct of a referendum on the establishment of a new “South-West Ethiopia” region, which was itself also postponed in early June to September 2021, because of persisting insecurity in some areas.³³⁰ By the end of June 2021, no election results had been published, and NEBE reported that complaints had been lodged in 160 constituencies by 30 political parties, with five making broader claims of problems.³³¹

³²⁴ Maggie Fick, Reuters, 28 May 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/abiys-ethiopia-press-freedom-flourished-then-fear-returned-2021-05-28/>

³²⁵ Will Davison interviewed by Teklai Michael, *Mereba Esset*, posted 27 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vIex8H8RIY>

³²⁶ Embassy of the FDRE London, 29 December 2020, <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/ethiopia-2021-elections-to-be-held-in-june/>

³²⁷ Daily Monitor, 25 May 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/five-things-to-know-about-ethiopia-s-election-3413042>

³²⁸ BBC, 18 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57094394>

³²⁹ NEBE confirmed on 22 May 2021 a list of 40 constituencies in six regions which would have no poll in June, *Addis Standard*, 22 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-electoral-board-issues-list-of-40-constituencies-in-six-regions-where-elections-wont-take-place-per-schedule/>

³³⁰ *Addis Standard*, 10 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-defect-in-ballot-papers-leads-to-postponed-election-in-dozens-of-constituencies-somali-region-sw-referendum/>

³³¹ NEBE Press Conference, 29 June 2021, @NEBEthiopia; see also *Addis Standard*, 26 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-five-opposition-parties-who-participated-in-this-weeks-general-election-complain-about-electoral-process/>

If all now agree that there is an acute and deepening security crisis they agree on little else. For opponents and critics of the TPLF/EPRDF (and of the ethnic federal system they designed, and other ethno-nationalist or federalist political forces), the cause of instability and violence has been clear and singular. National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) chairman, Belete Molla, summed up the view shared across federal government, ruling party, and pan-Ethiopianist and Amhara opposition groups: “TPLF was always a mafia group, orchestrating massacres across the country.”³³²

As massacres and conflict have continued, even intensified, over the months since November 2020, during which the TPLF has been fighting (apparently for its survival) in Tigray, the credibility of that simple narrative should presumably have begun to unravel. It persists, however, as an important thread of government rhetoric³³³ and analytical polemic,³³⁴ and is widely believed in Ethiopia. The narrative that there is a “*trail of repeated pre-war ethnic styled massacres ... where the hand of the TPLF providing money and logistical support has often been present*”³³⁵ is a cornerstone of the campaign in favour of the war in Tigray: emotive and resilient even in the absence of published evidence. This position often conflates with strong antipathy towards “ethnic politics” in general, seen as the root of all of Ethiopia’s problems, and a natural consequence of the current federal arrangement.³³⁶ Ethno-nationalists are then dismissed as insurgent “*terrorist groupings*”, with no programme other than “*nihilistic killings*,”³³⁷ in a further depoliticization of analysis. This narrative has facilitated their exclusion from electoral competition.

The following discussion examines developments in Oromo and Amhara politics since 2018 (and briefly elsewhere in the country), before concluding with a resumé of other factors relevant to the challenges Ethiopia faces in mid-2021.

5.4 Oromia politics and conflict - optimism and excitement

In 2018, after four years of anti-government Oromo protests, the new Prime Minister rode to power on a euphoric and well-cultivated wave of Oromo nationalism. His party brokered the return of Oromo (and other) opposition organisations. Pre-eminent amongst them was the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF, established in 1973

³³² Quoted by David Pilling and Andres Schipani in the Financial Times, 18 November 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/b888c23a-45ed-4937-9154-3117cc23e202>

³³³ See for instance Addis Standard, 2 June 2021, citing Oromia spokesperson Getachew Balcha <https://addisstandard.com/news-residents-in-horo-guduru-zone-say-eritrean-troops-are-persecuting-civilians-regional-government-denies-allegations-blames-tplf-shene/>

³³⁴ Jon Abbink, “The Atlantic Community Mistake on Ethiopia”, March 2021 <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/3158742>

³³⁵ Abbink, March 2021, p.28

³³⁶ See for instance, Andargachew Tsige, shortly after his release from jail: “ethnic politics has been entrenched now for 27 years, and that is one of the major problems the current prime minister will be facing. But the way he thinks about it, all his speeches, is towards really solving this ethnic problem and creating a unified country.” (Interviewed by Zeinab Badawi, BBC Hardtalk, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJv1NermBEY>)

³³⁷ Abbink, March 2021, p.22

during the Haile Selassie period.³³⁸ During a long period in exile (latterly hosted and trained in Eritrea) OLF toyed with a secessionist agenda, but this seemed to fade over time. Their return in September 2018 sparked more euphoria and wild optimism – and a violent backlash in and around Addis Ababa/Finfinne, as rival gangs of Ethiopianist and Oromo young men faced off. There were targeted killings of other groups, especially in Burayu.³³⁹ Elders were mobilised to broker community reconciliation, but the damage was done in terms of the urban fear of dangerous “ethnic conflict,” a designation which seemed to provide its own explanation.

Social media activists and journalists who had led the Oromo protest movement from the diaspora also returned to Ethiopia in 2018. They initially worked closely with the Oromo ruling party, reinforcing the early popularity of the new regime, and (often controversially) encouraging returning rebels to demobilise. A Muslim from Arsi, Jawar Mohammed was a polarising figure: disliked both by the TPLF/EPRDF against whom he had mobilised since 2014, but also by Amhara and Ethiopian nationalists; but wildly popular amongst young people in Oromia. His return was a tumultuous affair, provoking extreme reactions – and shocking violence.³⁴⁰ Although Government media sources were initially sympathetic to Jawar (and his Oromo Media Network, OMN, was given permission to broadcast), the Patriotic Ginbot 7 (PG7)-owned Ethiopian Satellite TV station (ESAT) and others campaigned against him and his followers as dangerous radicals fomenting ethnic violence.

A collapsing consensus

After a honeymoon period in 2018, Oromo nationalist euphoria began to subside at the end of the year. On their return to Ethiopia in September 2018, the OLF enjoyed very strong support in western Ethiopia, especially Wollega and Illubabor.³⁴¹ There was no clarity about the terms of their return and arrangements for demobilisation, or – remarkably – whether these had been discussed at all.³⁴² At least one armed contingent resisted re-integration and re-emerged as the Oromo Liberation Army, OLA. In late 2018, Ethiopia’s National Defence Force (ENDF) units were dispatched to the four zones of Wollega in what seems to have become an extremely brutal counter insurgency against armed units and factions, who had begun armed activity

³³⁸ Throughout period of the Derg government the OLF had had a fractious relationship with the TPLF/EPRDF, always closer to the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front. Although they briefly joined the transitional government in 1991, the stage was set for a showdown. They withdrew from government in 1992, but quickly found themselves outflanked by EPRDF.

³³⁹ In Burayu in September 2018, 23 ethnic Guraghe and Gamo were killed; 3,000 Oromos were arrested in what critics saw as a return to repression. See Zecharias Zelalem, O-Pride, 26 September 2018, <https://www.opride.com/2018/09/26/mass-arrests-of-thousands-in-addis-ababa-slammed-by-amnesty-international/>. At the time, Burayu was the fastest growing municipality in the country, under pressure both from rural migrants to the city, and urban Addis Ababans in search of affordable commutable housing. As land lease prices escalated, a roaring trade in illegal land deals and acute pressure on local resources fed the nationalist antipathies of local administrators and tensions were extremely high.

³⁴⁰ At a rally to welcome him in Shashemene in August 2018, his supporters notoriously lynched and crucified a man they suspected of treachery; Engidu Woldie, *ESAT*, 13 August 2018, <https://ethsat.com/2018/08/ethiopia-arrest-in-mob-killing-of-innocent-man-in-shashemene/>.

³⁴¹ OLF lays claim to the powerful legacy in the protestant west of social activist and Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Secretary General Gudina Tumsa, who was killed by the Dergue in 1979.

³⁴² See Marew Abebe Salemot, *Ethiopia Insight*, 24 April 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/24/ethiopias-bungled-2018-deal-with-oromo-rebels-is-the-cause-of-current-turmoil/>.

in western border areas.³⁴³ By April and May 2019 the OLF leadership had issued statements distancing the organisation from the OLA's armed activity. Meanwhile between January and December 2019 pressure on alleged supporters of OLA/OLF increased, with mass arrests and extra judicial executions, notably in Guji and West Guji.³⁴⁴ In 2018, violent clashes between Gedeo and their (Oromo) Guji neighbours saw up to a million people flee their homes, triggering a humanitarian crisis and bringing Ethiopia to the top of global internally displaced persons (IDP) rankings.³⁴⁵ IDPs moved in large numbers from Kercha wereda of West Guji in Oromia into Gedeo; in smaller numbers also from several kebeles of Guji zone, Gedeb wereda, into West Guji. The displaced majority Gedeo were reluctant to accept government pressure to return home, and local attempts at peacebuilding were slow and uncertain.³⁴⁶³⁴⁷ Government blamed "*violent criminals*" for conflict, in the context of the raised ethno-nationalist rhetoric as diaspora forces returned to the country.³⁴⁸ Less discussed were the longer standing dynamics of inter-group relations and conflict on this border, which were reshaped by new opportunities for elite jockeying in the 1990s, and formed a known political flashpoint.³⁴⁹ Violence is reported to have returned to Guji in April and May 2021, hindering humanitarian access.³⁵⁰

In January 2019, there had been unconfirmed allegations of government airstrikes against the OLA in Kellem Wollega, as the ENDF moved into Wollega in force, undertaking a sustained military operation in the area.³⁵¹ The government crackdown cranked up again in the early months of 2020. By 3 January 2020 mobile and landline phone and internet services to the four Wollega zones were cut off.³⁵² On 21 January 2020, Oromo rights organisations had accused the government of "*adding fuel to the fire*."³⁵³ In March 2020, *The Economist* reported that the crackdown in Western Oromia was "*bloody and lawless*."³⁵⁴ Observers and rights organisations alleged a litany of extra judicial killings by the state.

Emerging Oromo opposition – neutralised

³⁴³ On the background to the build-up of tension in the west see Ermias Tasfaye, *Ethiopia Insight*, 1 January 2019, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/01/team-lemmas-choice-power-or-peace/>

³⁴⁴ Amnesty International, 29 May 2020, AFR 25/2358/2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR2523582020ENGLISH.PDF>

³⁴⁵ Tom Gardner, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/mar/14/shadow-falls-over-ethiopia-reforms-warnings-of-crisis-ignored-abiy-ahmed>

³⁴⁶ *The New Humanitarian*, 11 November 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/11/11/Ethiopia-peace-ambassadors-Gedeo-West-Guji>

³⁴⁷ *Addis Standard*, 16 March 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/editorial-the-government-should-own-the-gedeo-idp-tragedy-and-respond-accordingly/>

³⁴⁸ *Addis Standard*, 15 July 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/feature-how-ethiopia-is-dealing-with-unprecedented-idp-crisis/>

³⁴⁹ See, for instance Shibru Abate Dagne, 'Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Ethiopia,' 2013, <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/14109>; Ingvild Grindaker, 'A study of recurring inter-group conflict in Ethiopia' November 2020, <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/20052/thesis.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>

³⁵⁰ OCHA, "Access Snapshot, Guji zone, January-April 2021," 30 April 2021, published 15 May 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-guji-zone-oromia-region-january-april-2021-0>

³⁵¹ Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, *Africa News*, 13 January 2019 <https://www.africanews.com/2019/01/13/ethiopia-army-executing-airstrikes-against-olf-in-western-oromia/>

³⁵² Human Rights Watch, 9 March 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/node/339303/printable/print>

³⁵³ Ermias Tasfaye, *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 February 2020 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/14/amid-blackout-western-oromia-plunges-deeper-into-chaos-and-confusion/>

³⁵⁴ *The Economist*, 21 March 2020, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/19/a-hidden-war-threatens-ethiopias-transition-to-democracy>

Nevertheless, in mid-/late-2019 most still anticipated that a free and fair poll would see a range of parties elected, and lead to a real political transition. A powerful Oromo coalition, including opposition figures, and with a clear popular mandate, was widely seen as likely to emerge, with the legitimacy to influence the direction of Ethiopia's future evolution at national level. Polarisation grew in October 2019, with the controversial reopening of the renovated Menelik Palace.³⁵⁵ Later in the month, the PM gave a speech in parliament threatening to take measures against “*media owners with foreign passports;*” and the following day Jawar alleged that the police had tried to orchestrate an attack on him.³⁵⁶ In the febrile and violent uproar that followed at least 89 people were killed. In the absence of a credible investigation,³⁵⁷ and with plenty of social, economic and governance failings providing grounds for grievance, highly politicised narratives filled the vacuum.

Many Oromos had grown critical of what they saw as increasingly “Ethiopianist” or “unitarist” government rhetoric, disappointment which crystallised when the PP was established on 1 December 2019.³⁵⁸ Over the course of 2019 divisions had emerged between the PM and many of his Oromo allies, inside and outside the ruling party. Key Oromo figures grew uncomfortable with moves to a more unitarist “anti-federal” (for some even “anti-Oromo”) stance, but the PM drew support from elite politicians in the Oromo zones of Shoa, close to Addis Ababa. By the end of the year, his most popular ruling ally Lemma Megerssa had distanced himself. At the end of December 2019, the influential activist Jawar Mohammed finally declared that he would run for election and joined the opposition Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). This abruptly raised the prospect of a strong pan-Oromo opposition movement, capable to mount a formidable challenge to the ruling party: with Jawar on board, OFC was recast as a nationally significant competitor, with appeal across Oromia zones of the protestant west (home of Bekele Gerba), and the Muslim east, as well its existing powerbase in west Shoa (home of Merera Gudina).

The prospect of a transformative election unravelled with the decision that they be postponed due to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. When popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundeesa was assassinated on 29 June 2020, three days of violence erupted during which hundreds of people died. Armed youths destroyed property in Addis Ababa on 30 June. Jawar and Bekele were accused of trying to politicise Hachalu’s funeral, and quickly detained, arguably fanning further violence. In Ambo, 3 policemen and 78 civilians, including Hachalu’s uncle were killed as the singer was

³⁵⁵ James Jeffrey, CNN, 18 October 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/imperial-palace-ethiopia/index.html>

³⁵⁶ Abdi Latif Dahir, *New York Times*, 24 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/world/africa/ethiopia-protest-abiy.html>; Tiksa Negeri, *Reuters*, 24 October 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/hundreds-gathered-outside-house-of-ethiopian-activist-after-deadly-day-of-protests-idUSKBN1X3118>

³⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, 1 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/ethiopia-justice-needed-deadly-october-violence>

³⁵⁸ See for instance Awol K Allo, “why Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party Could be Bad News for Ethiopia” *Al-Jazeera*, 5 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/5/why-abiy-ahmeds-prosperity-party-could-be-bad-news-for-ethiopia>

buried.³⁵⁹ In Shashemene more than 150 people lost their lives, and non-Oromo communities (including Rastafarians) were reported to have been targeted.³⁶⁰

Analysis of these events is extremely divisive, and controversy persisted with the publication of the official Human Rights Commission (EHRC) investigation report.³⁶¹ Analysis produced six months later summed up the polarisation: *“The party line is that officials who were negligent, disloyal, or complicit in the violence were removed. The counter-narrative is that the unrest was stoked and then used to purge opponents and ruling figures who sided with Lemma, or with the opposition, by falsely blaming them for orchestrating the violence.”*³⁶² If the October 2019 violence and crackdown offered a test run for the identification and dismantling of Jawar’s *qeeroo* activist networks, July 2020 provided ample pretext for the arrest of opposition OFC and OLF leaders, along with tens of thousands of others. Lemma Megerssa and other critics were suspended from the ruling party in mid-August 2020.³⁶³ Diplomatic sources concluded that the government crackdown across Oromia from July 2020 reversed the early gains of the “transition,” which was now widely seen as fundamentally derailed.

Over the period from 2018 to 2020, ESAT had entrenched the narration of #AmharaGenocide, establishing a context conducive to the narrative of “ethnic conflict,” and the July arrests and September prosecutions were wildly popular beyond Oromo circles. OFC’s leaders were charged with extremely serious crimes,³⁶⁴ just a few days after the PM published an opinion piece stating that *“individuals and groups, disaffected by the transformations taking place, are using everything at their disposal to derail them. They are harvesting the seeds of inter-ethnic and inter-religious division and hatred.”*³⁶⁵ The wave of Oromo nationalism on which the PM had risen to power at the beginning of 2018 was silenced and discredited.³⁶⁶

Consolidation of a violent impasse

From the end of January to early March 2021 Jawar and other high profile Oromo prisoners went on hunger strike. By the time they finally agreed to call it off,³⁶⁷ both OLF and OFC had withdrawn from the election.³⁶⁸ All significant federalist and

³⁵⁹ CNN, 3 July 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/02/africa/ethiopian-singer-buried-protests-intl/index.html>

³⁶⁰ Arefaynie Fantahun, Ethiopia Observer, 6 July 2021 <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2020/07/06/ethnically-motivated-attacks-in-shashemene-and-elsewhere/>

³⁶¹ EHRC, undated, “It did not feel like we had a government”, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oGkx-fFhTX_9AHoIzj8KwleWpyPZu5O/view

³⁶² Ethiopia Insight, 5 January 2021 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/>

³⁶³ Dawit Endeshaw, Reuters, 18 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKCN25E23E>

³⁶⁴ Al-Jazeera, 19 September 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/19/ethiopia-files-terror-charges-against-jawar-mohammed-others>. The inclusion of allegations of collusion with Egypt raised eyebrows.

³⁶⁵ Abiy Ahmed, *Economist*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2020/09/17/abiy-ahmed-on-the-threats-to-ethiopias-democratic-transition> cited in *The Independent*, 21 September 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/jawar-mohammed-ethiopia-terrorism-charges-b498332.html>

³⁶⁶ Jawar published a call for an end to the war in Tigray from jail: *Kush Media Network*, 1 December 2020, <https://eritreahub.org/jailed-oromo-leader-jawar-mohammed-calls-for-a-peaceful-end-to-the-tigray-war>

³⁶⁷ Mahlet Fasil, *Addis Standard*, 8 March 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-elders-intervention-ends-hunger-strike-by-oromo-opposition-politicians/>

³⁶⁸ Since 2020 a separate faction led by Ararso Bikila vied with Dawd Ibssa’s leadership for the title “OLF”, with NEBE asking for clarification of its status in February 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-electoral-board-cautions-olf-party-structure->

nationalist voices in Oromo politics had now been excluded, as a Shoa-dominated PP elite and its co-opted allies rolled out the ruling party election campaign on behalf of the PM. Although the pan-Ethiopianist opposition Ethiopians for Social Democracy (Ezema) will field candidates, and is likely to win support in some urban centres of Oromia, the ruling PP faces little or no competition elsewhere. Nevertheless, ongoing fighting and violence means that the election will not take place in significant parts of the region, including the four Wollega zones.³⁶⁹ Protest has been effectively and comprehensively repressed, but violent opposition and the killings of civilians seemed if anything to have increased over the period to the end of May 2021.

Little is known about the real strength and scope of the OLA. Its social media presence has grown since the beginning of 2021, and videos seem to suggest extensive recruitment and improved equipment. In the words of one commentator it *“waged a blitzkrieg over the last few months, starting in Wollega and expanding quickly into Arsi and Bale.”*³⁷⁰ The killing of civilians in Oromia exploded in the national narrative on 31 October 2020 when 54 people were *“rounded up and killed”*³⁷¹ in a school compound in Guliso, West Wollega,³⁷² in what Amnesty described as a *“horrendous attack on a village by armed group [...] The fact that this horrendous incident occurred shortly after government troops abruptly withdrew from the area in unexplained circumstances raises questions that must be answered.”*³⁷³ EHRC described the attack as an *“unconscionable” “massacre.”*³⁷⁴

Unexplained attacks on civilians have persisted, and many are reported to target Amhara groups. In February 2021, 12 people were killed in Eastern Oromia, and on 6 and 9 March, 42 died in Hora Guduru zone in the west.³⁷⁵ At the end of March, 30 people were killed in West Wollega.³⁷⁶ On 29 April “at least” 20 people were killed in Limu Kosa, in Jimma zone.³⁷⁷ On 30 April, 15 passengers on a bus at Amuyu, close to Hora Guduru zone were killed.³⁷⁸ “OLF Shanee” is consistently blamed for atrocities right across the region and in April and May 2021 also in Amhara (see

[its-members-to-convene-general-assembly-to-settle-leadership-split-ethioelection2021/](#), which at the end of March 2021, apparently came too late for participation <https://borkena.com/2021/03/29/nebe-oromo-liberation-front-congress-contravene-party-regulation/>. There has continued to be confusion on this point, allowing sources to claim that the OLF will participate in the election.

³⁶⁹ NEBE confirmed on 22 May 2021 that seven constituencies in the west of Oromia would have no poll in June, *Addis Standard*, 22 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-electoral-board-issues-list-of-40-constituencies-in-six-regions-where-elections-wont-take-place-per-schedule/>

³⁷⁰ René Lefort ‘Ethiopia’s vicious deadlock,’ *Ethiopia Insight*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/27/ethiopias-vicious-deadlock/>

³⁷¹ BBC, 3 November 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54787034>

³⁷² Amnesty International, quoted in *The Guardian*, 2 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/02/killed-ethiopia-massacre-amnesty-oromia-amhara>

³⁷³ Amnesty International, 3 November 2020 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/ethiopia-over-50-killed-horrendous-attack-village-armed-group>

³⁷⁴ The Organisation for World Peace, quoting Commissioner Daniel Bekele, <https://theowp.org/dozens-killed-in-brutal-western-ethiopia-attack/>

³⁷⁵ Zecharias Zelalem, *Al-Jazeera*, 20 March 2021 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/20/worsening-violence-western-ethiopia-forcing-civilians-to-flee>

³⁷⁶ Reuters, 31 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-attack-idUSKBN2BN2S8>

³⁷⁷ Reuters, 29 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/attackers-kill-least-20-attack-ethiopias-oromiya-region-says-official-2021-04-29/>

³⁷⁸ Garda World, 1 May 2021, <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/473871/ethiopia-armed-assailants-kill-15-civilians-in-attack-in-oromia-state-april-30>

below). The OLA has equally regularly denied responsibility. In the absence of credible investigation, and with ongoing counter insurgency, polarised rhetoric has filled the vacuum: Ethiopians on all sides feel sure they know who killed whom and why.

On 6 May 2021, Ethiopia's parliament approved a bill defining TPLF and OLA/"OLF *Shanee*" as "terrorist" organisations,³⁷⁹ finally introducing a measure which had been rumoured to have split opinion amongst PP decision-makers in late 2020 when first mooted. The move has been interpreted as an attempt to block international pressure for negotiations with the two organisations, as each has apparently begun to gain ground militarily.³⁸⁰ International observers have privately commented that the move has also shredded what remained of the credibility of Ethiopia's likeable Attorney General.³⁸¹ The legal shift has been followed only by worsening brutality, including a qualitatively different level of "authorised" state violence, in which social media activists have seen parallels with *Derg*-era executions.

Kellem Wollega zone, in particular, has seen a number of gruesome murders blamed on the authorities in Dembi Dollo. At the end of April 2021 university lecturer and doctoral student Kajela Tasisa was killed.³⁸² On 8 May Oromo broadcast journalist Sisay Fida was assassinated, and the government and OLA traded blame.³⁸³ On 11 May 2021, authorities carried out the public parading and extra-judicial execution of 9th grader Amanuel Wondimu at a roundabout in the town, after reportedly calling members of the public including the boy's family to witness the events. A video of them was posted onto Facebook by the local administration.³⁸⁴ Only a few days earlier, the EHRC (itself periodically critiqued by Oromo sources for alleged "*anti-Oromo bias*") reported concerns about the treatment of large numbers of those detained in centres in Oromia,³⁸⁵ and now quickly expressed its alarm,³⁸⁶ as did Human Rights Watch.³⁸⁷ Later in May, unconfirmed reports of a second public execution, this time in Borana zone, circulated on Oromo social media, with reports that 300 family and community members had fled to Kenya.³⁸⁸

³⁷⁹ *Addis Standard*, 7 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-fed-attorney-general-says-terrorist-designated-shene-refers-to-oromo-liberation-army-ola-responds-vows-to-engage-in-total-war/>

³⁸⁰ On the changing military balance in Tigray see Ermias Teka in this volume.

³⁸¹ In a critical response, the OLA described the move as "tantamount to a declaration of war on the Oromo people". The use of the term *OLF Shanee* in the proclamation has caused legal controversy.

³⁸² *Addis Standard*, 29 April 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-mother-of-university-lecturer-doctoral-student-confirms-govt-security-forces-killed-him-at-his-home/>

³⁸³ CPJ, 21 May 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/05/oromia-broadcasting-network-journalist-sisay-fida-shot-and-killed-in-ethiopia/>

³⁸⁴ *Addis Standard*, 12 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-days-after-rights-commission-report-of-massive-crackdown-on-civilians-security-forces-in-oromia-execute-a-young-man-in-public-view-zonal-city-admin-officials-justify-the-act/>

³⁸⁵ *Addis Standard*, 6 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-rights-commission-rings-alarm-at-large-number-arbitrary-detention-of-prisoners-across-oromia-reveals-cases-of-police-extortion/>

³⁸⁶ Cited by *Ethiopian Monitor*, 12 May 2021, <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/05/12/ehrc-condemns-extrajudicial-killing-of-suspected-criminal/>

³⁸⁷ *Human Rights Watch*, 'Boy publicly executed in Oromia' 10 June 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/10/ethiopia-boy-publicly-executed-oromia>

³⁸⁸ Sam Bekele, *Twitter*, 28 May 2021, <https://twitter.com/SamBekeleGerba/status/1398275967370633223?s=20>

At the beginning of June 2021, Oromos in Horo Guduru zone and the OLF alleged that civilians were being abused and killed by Tigrigna-speaking Eritrean forces: a government spokesperson denied that Eritreans were present, and, as ever, blamed the TPLF.³⁸⁹ On 10 June, OCHA reported that an additional 55,000 people had been displaced by renewed conflict in East Wollega zone.³⁹⁰ On 11 June, a further OLF statement claimed that there had been a “new large-scale deployment” of Eritrean soldiers into Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz after 5 June 2021.³⁹¹

There was much speculation over the early months of 2021 as to whether a non-competitive election in other parts of Oromia would provoke a backlash from the “Oromo street,” given the dramatic national leverage that Oromo protests achieved as they built steadily between 2014 and 2018. Two key drivers of the 2014-18 Oromo protests had been effectively eliminated – or at least silenced – during the intervening period: the critically important (tacit and active) support of OPDO ruling party cadres; and the network of social media information exchange and activism that animated the so-called “*qeeroo*.” A combination of financial co-option and forceful repression has apparently proved effective in much of Oromia. The ruling party ran unopposed in more than 100 constituencies in the region in June.

By 2021, the majority of the Oromo leaders of the ruling PP were from the zones of Shoa, close to Addis Ababa, where communities have tended to have a closer identification with the modern Ethiopian state centre, often involved in – or at least having a more positive experience of – its expansion at the end of the nineteenth century. The ruling PP can be expected to do well in many of these areas and especially amongst the new protestant church constituencies many of whose members have a particular enthusiasm for the PM. The scope for the completion of a peaceful process beyond these areas, remained to be seen at the end of June. Reports of governmental pressure on voters in Arsi surfaced in April/May 2021.³⁹²

After the emotive scenes of September 2018, there has also been particular concern about the poll in Addis Ababa (Finfinne), which it was thought could become a flashpoint for competing claims of Oromo and Ethiopian or Amhara nationalists, especially (but not only) if there were a shift in the balance of power (to Ezema or Balderas) as a result of the election. The decision of the cassation court on 24 May 2021 to allow four Balderas candidates (also jailed in the July 2020 crackdown) to stand for election in Addis Ababa has been highly significant and required NEBE to reprint 1.3 million new ballot papers.³⁹³ Pending the declaration of results, the move seems likely effectively to have split the opposition vote in Addis Ababa to the benefit of the incumbent. The concerns expressed by the NEBE Chairperson (herself a former judge) about the constitutionality of the last-minute court decision raised

³⁸⁹ *Addis Standard*, 2 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-residents-in-horo-guduru-zone-say-eritrean-troops-are-persecuting-civilians-regional-government-denies-allegations-blames-tplf-shene/>

³⁹⁰ *Addis Standard*, 10 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-over-55000-people-newly-displaced-in-east-wellega-un/>

³⁹¹ OLF statement, 11 June 2021, <https://twitter.com/CaptinCook9000/status/1403412850631053315?s=20>

³⁹² *Addis Standard*, 18 May 2021 <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-as-electoral-board-reckons-with-delays-and-voters-registration-malfunction-riddle-the-process-eus-final-decision-is-to-send-no-mission-at-all/>

³⁹³ *Addis Standard*, 3 June 2021 <https://addisstandard.com/news-nebe-to-register-jailed-members-of-the-opposition-balderas-for-candidacy/>

eyebrows, but are politically (and arguably also constitutionally) less surprising.³⁹⁴ At the end of June 2021, with results pending, many concluded that the opposition looked to have been neatly outmanoeuvred.

5.5 Amhara politics and conflict

If the dynamics of politics and conflict in and around Oromia are both murky and open to different interpretation, political developments amongst Amhara politicians, groups, and organisations, and in the Amhara region since 2018, are if anything yet more opaque, and subject to yet more speculation. The Amhara element of the EPRDF closely supported the election of PM Abiy in 2018, allying with Oromo peers, and belatedly withdrawing their own candidate, to ensure his victory. For some this was the culmination of the so-called “Oromara alliance,”³⁹⁵ which had seen a people-to-people conference in Bahr Dar in November 2017.³⁹⁶ Like the Oromo ruling party, the Amhara ruling party took early steps to distance itself from the EPRDF, renaming itself in mid-2018, and joining the PP in November 2019. With some notable exceptions (Deputy PM Demeke, for instance) there has been significant churn amongst Amhara ruling politicians since 2018, with rumoured tensions between different wings of the ruling party and across wider Amhara social networks, as to how, and how far, to support the PM.

A delicate balance - of power and perspective

Many observers have suggested that the outbreak and prosecution of the war in Tigray tipped the federal balance of power firmly in favour of the PP’s Amhara bloc, Abiy’s Amhara advisors, and President Isaias of Eritrea.³⁹⁷ After the initial declaration of victory at the end of November 2020, sharp exchanges between the Amhara and Oromo (and other) members of the PP leadership were rumoured to have persisted through to the end of the year, reportedly destabilising the delicate alliance forged in 2017/2018.³⁹⁸ Amhara and Oromo politicians’ concepts of Ethiopia’s history, their visions of the future, and readings of existing hierarchies, interests and party relationships seem to have continued to fluctuate and diverge within the PP.

One cannot generalise across groups of politicians, and political sociology would indicate that differentiation is likely to be marked by many issues. However, there are broad trends in political differences between the two blocs over three fundamental issues. Firstly, the future of federalism: many Amhara politicians are thought to be keener to see a return to a more unitary, or regional or at least non-

³⁹⁴ *Addis Standard*, 3 June 2021 <https://addisstandard.com/news-nebe-to-register-jailed-members-of-the-opposition-balderas-for-candidacy/>

³⁹⁵ Dandana Bafkane, *Kichuu Info*, 5 January 2018, <https://kichuu.com/tplf-weak-spot-uncovered/>

³⁹⁶ *Borkena*, 4 November 2017, citing Addisu Arega Kitesa <https://borkena.com/2017/11/04/oromo-amhara-conference-bahir-dar/>

³⁹⁷ *Africa Confidential*, 3 December 2020, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/13154/Citadel_falls_but_the_war_goes_on

³⁹⁸ Although DPM Demeke and PM Abiy continued to lead the two groupings, the internal political constellation within each of the two regional PP groupings had shifted very considerably by late 2020.

ethnic arrangement than (many of) their non-Amhara ruling peers. (Amongst Oromo politicians, as noted above, willingness to move on this issue also tends to divide Shoa and non-Shoa elites.) Secondly, perceptions of the security and rights to land of Amharas living beyond the borders of Amhara region also diverge. Events in western and southern Tigray, and the prospect of further land annexation by the Amhara regional state greatly increased tensions relating to land. Military advances by the TDF in late June, and a unilateral federal announcement of “standing down” inflamed regional anxiety, and strong rhetoric.³⁹⁹ Finally, approaches towards righting the perceived “wrongs of the past” – for instance with respect to the position of Amhara politicians and businesses in the overall political constellation have hardened within the ruling party: many (opposition and ruling) Amhara politicians are seen as favouring the restoration of a more influential position, “*commensurate with history*” or with restoring the widely perceived injustices of federalism.⁴⁰⁰

While the PM and the PP’s Amhara politicians consistently assert they want a real national (even multinational) federation, there is a widespread view this is mere code for establishing a “geographic” (i.e. non-ethnic) arrangement. This could dissolve the nationalities-based federation established under the EPRDF and reinstall a more uniform, centralised - even unitary – system: familiar from Ethiopia’s past, and stripped of nationality rights to self-determination. It is unclear exactly who seeks what form of constitutional reform, and what scope of change would be feasible when. For many stakeholders from other groups, the ambiguity is chilling. Unifying assurances that “everyone agrees that we should retain a federal system” do not reassure.

The influence of radical Amhara nationalist voices has grown in the politics of Amhara region in 2021, and a number of potentially conflictual unknowns are in play: whether the social base of the Amhara PP think of “geographic federalism” in terms of expanding the existing territorial boundaries of the region; how far the Amhara PP may in turn be prepared to push for this; how the PM and other PP politicians would respond; and whether Amhara and Oromo elites, who together have a controlling stake in the PP by virtue of the size of their respective populations, can sustain an agreement on how to distribute power among themselves. Observers have indicated that this situation has evolved into a delicate game of poker within the ruling party: even as the PM relies on Amhara actors’ support, he is well aware that they may not necessarily constitute reliable partners who share his longer-term political objectives; just as Amhara politicians are aware that he may not necessarily be a reliable partner for the achievement of their (diverse, opaque and shifting) goals. Constructive ambiguity about the scope of shared goals, and highly personalised politics at the federal level have allowed this unstable situation to persist as crisis has grown.

³⁹⁹ See for instance Amharaweb.com, 29 June 2021

⁴⁰⁰ See for instance Yohannes Gedamu, Quartz media 21 June 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1311288/ethiopia-amhara-persecution-stands-in-way-of-abiy-ahmed-reform-agenda/>

Regional political instability and the return of the opposition

The depth of instability within the Amhara regional government was demonstrated in June 2019, when regional President Ambachew Mekonnen, who had then been in power for three months, was assassinated along with his Vice President and Attorney General, allegedly by controversial regional security head, General Asamnew Tsigé.⁴⁰¹ Asamnew was himself killed the following day, removing the prospect of further investigation of his motives. The incident was officially described as a “regional coup” attempt, seemingly by a more militant Amhara nationalist security boss of his moderate pro-federal colleague. Shocking in themselves, the significance of the Bahr Dar killings increased with the murder the same day of the ENDF Chief of Staff in Addis Ababa. There is much that remains unexplained. It may be that the simultaneous killings in Addis Ababa were serendipitously organised by other actors, but this is difficult to assess in the absence of a public investigation and published findings, or a public record from judicial process.⁴⁰²

It seems likely that root causes of the “coup attempt” related to grievances from multiple overlapping interest groups over the direction and momentum of reforms, and their purchase over reforms at the regional and national levels. These issues remain unaddressed. Division may also have reflected zonal or historical “*awraja*” sub-region differentiation, with longstanding political competition between east and west: North and South Wollo versus the Gondar zones and East/West Gojjam. The PM quickly installed one of his national security advisors, a former colleague at the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), and the regional special forces were subdued, with a series of arrests. Deputy PM Demeke also tried to encourage rival regional ruling groups to agree on an agenda to settle insecurity. There was a broader reshuffle in September and October 2019, apparently geared at instilling loyalty and coherence within the regional administration.

The emergence after 2016 or return after 2018 of a range of opposition elites and organisations (notably the NAMA and PG7) to the Amhara political scene has also had the effect of radicalising the ruling PP within Amhara region, discouraging a more conciliatory stance on federal reform or land claims and pushing the party “into a corner.”⁴⁰³ When armed opposition groups returned to Ethiopia, the Amhara ruling party sought to incorporate many, including Amhara nationalist militants newly released from jail. As a result, Amhara PP and opposition NAMA and Ezema

⁴⁰¹ General Asamnew had risen as a commissar in the ENDF, before being arrested and convicted of fomenting a Ginbot 7 coup within the military in Bahr Dar in 2009 (<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WL0912/S00425.htm>). He was prosecuted along with Melaku Tefera, Tefera Mamo, Alehubel Amare and others, and (in absentia) Berhanu Nega, and Andargachew Tsigé, now of Ezema and ESAT respectively. Asamnew was tortured in prison and released only in the February 2018 amnesty at the end of PM Hailemariam’s tenure. His appointment to the Amhara government as head of Security and Administration shocked TPLF/EPRDF observers, signalling the emergence of a new, assertive nationalism in the Amhara ruling party, and the determination to equip it with a strong Special Force. Asamnew’s funeral in Lalibella drew tens of thousands of mourners.

⁴⁰² In comments which have a different resonance in 2021 in the context of the war in Tigray, Andargachew Tsigé was quoted in the wake of the killings as saying: “the way to perdition is wide open. What we have witnessed recently is a glimpse of the first steps to a downward spiral towards hell. [...] There simply is no possibility in the country where one group will perish and others spared. We all stand or fall together.” (Andargachew Tsigé, 4 July 2019, quoted in the *Ethiopia Observer* <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/07/04/getachew-reda-and-andargachew-tsigé-on-the-attempted-coup/>)

⁴⁰³ See Anonymous, *Ethiopia Insight*, 7 June 2021, ‘Amhara Nationalism at the Polls’ <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/07/amhara-nationalism-at-the-polls-in-ethiopia/>

groupings all have complex links with one another. Key members of the Amhara political elite and the ANRS security apparatus had been hosted by Eritrea, and these links continued to be influential. Within weeks of his release from jail in 2018, and well ahead of the July Ethio-Eritrean summit, for instance, Andargachew Tsige told BBC's Hardtalk *"our relationship with Eritrea is not really based on short term gain [...] In fact my view about Eritreans has helped in convincing the current PM to take the measures he has taken" "there is going to be peace [with Eritrea] and a very close relationship in all respects as well."*⁴⁰⁴

NAMA emerged into prominence in 2016-18, appealing primarily to a young generation of Amhara nationalists who had grown up under federalism. Amhara nationalism had long been associated with the pan-Ethiopianism of the Derg-era Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), and with its heirs in the 2005 Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), PG7 and (most recently) Ezema. NAMA's rhetoric had a tougher and more ethnically-tinged edge. It gained ascendancy during the early phases of the transition in 2018, arguing that the TPLF had extended structural inequalities against Amhara into the constitution promulgated by the EPRDF in 1995.⁴⁰⁵ These (NAMA argued) limited political representation of Amhara interests to ANRS, undermining minority rights in other states where ethnic Amhara are also present. NAMA demanded the "return" of Amhara "ancestral" lands "removed by the TPLF" in the early 1990s. These included Wolkait "annexed" to Tigray,⁴⁰⁶ Metekel "annexed" to Benishangul-Gumuz, and parts of Shoa "annexed" to Oromia. This approach presaged increased violence between Amhara and those three neighbouring regions. In March 2021, in Addis Ababa, NAMA, the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), and Eskinder Nega's Balderas agreed to work together in one Amhara-affiliated camp.⁴⁰⁷

Meanwhile, in May 2019, PG7, the EDP, All Ethiopian Democratic Party, Semayawi (Blue) Party, New Generation Party, Gambella Regional Movement, and Unity for Democracy and Justice merged, establishing Ezema, later adding *ye-Ethiopia Ra'iy* (Ethiopia Vision) party.⁴⁰⁸ From the known PG7 leaders, only (non-Amhara) Berhanu Nega joined the executive committee (with an Ethiopian passport he was allowed to stand and campaign from the district level for the Ezema leadership election). After the congress, Ezema embarked on expanding its organisational presence throughout the country, establishing branch offices in all regions and trying to organise officers in all electoral constituencies. Although facing a rocky start in the Amhara region when Berhanu and PG7 attempted to hold a rally in the

⁴⁰⁴ Andargachew Tsige, interviewed by Zeinab Badawi, BBC Hardtalk, 14 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVVuoFTSYk0>

⁴⁰⁵ See Crisis Group, 'Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North,' 12 June 2020, [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b156-bridging-the-divide-in-ethiopia-north%20\(1\).pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b156-bridging-the-divide-in-ethiopia-north%20(1).pdf)

⁴⁰⁶ See Achamyeleh Tamiru, 2019, 'The Wolkait Affair' <https://www.amazon.com/Wolkait-Affairs-Achamyeleh-Tamiru/dp/1513653806> or <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/682013937317600140/> and Kalayu Abrha, AigaForum, 31 January 2021, <http://www.aigaforum.com/article2021/how-achamyeleh-killed-geography.htm>

⁴⁰⁷ Borkena, 18 March 2021, <https://borkena.com/2021/03/18/balderas-nama-form-alliance-ahead-of-ethiopia-election/>

⁴⁰⁸ Morris Kiruga, *The Africa Report*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/12910/ethiopia-opposition-leader-berhanu-nega-leads-new-party/>

febrile atmosphere of 2019,⁴⁰⁹ Ezema held large campaign rallies in Bahr Dar closer to the June 2021 election date.

By 2019, Amhara politicians across the political spectrum seemed to have come to share the belief that Amhara interests had been marginalised under federalism since 1991 often “*speaking in unison.*”⁴¹⁰ All, including longstanding members of the ruling party, blamed “Tigray domination” for their perceived loss of land and national prestige under the federation. They differed over the best strategy for reversing the situation. All of the Amhara parties (ruling and opposition) have supported the Tigray war, and the ruling party in particular “*needed a popularity boost ... needed to shake off the image of subservience and subordination ... It needed a victory.*”⁴¹¹

The effect of the war in Tigray and the pursuit of land claims

A reshuffle over the first weekend of the Tigray war increased the influence of Amhara politicians’ decision-making at the head of the federal government. The Amhara regional President was appointed head of National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) at the start of the Tigray war, and replaced by Agegnehu Teshager, widely considered more robustly anti-TPLF. The Deputy PM took on the Foreign Ministry portfolio and his predecessor became a national security advisor, rapidly shuttling to Khartoum to protest about Sudanese advances at Al-Fashaga, as ENDF forces were relocated. Further signalling the revival of a more robust Amhara nationalism Brigadier General Tefera Mamo, the late General Asamnew’s special forces commander, was brought back to head the regional special forces, launching a recruitment drive.

The Amhara regional government and its special forces have been heavily involved in the war in Tigray, and Amhara occupation and annexation of land in Western and Southern Tigray has hugely complicated the political landscape and brought international condemnation of a campaign of “ethnic cleansing” of Tigrayans.⁴¹² As with so many other issues, there are two incompatible narratives of the Western Tigray land issue,⁴¹³ and the establishment of new demographic facts on the ground in late 2020 pushed the achievement of a sustainable negotiated solution into the distance.⁴¹⁴ The Amhara regional government formally affirmed its intention to

⁴⁰⁹ Borkena, 29 March 2019, <https://borkena.com/2019/03/29/arbegnoch-ginbot-7-leader-berhanu-nega-interview-after-bahirdar-incident/>

⁴¹⁰ Anonymous, *Ethiopia Insight*, 7 June 2021, ‘Amhara Nationalism at the Polls’ <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/07/amhara-nationalism-at-the-polls-in-ethiopia/>

⁴¹¹ Anonymous, *Ethiopia Insight*, 7 June 2021, ‘Amhara Nationalism’

⁴¹² Al-Jazeera, 10 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/10/us-top-diplomat-decries-ethnic-cleansing-in-ethiopias-tigray>

⁴¹³ The extent of Amhara (and Eritrean) irredentist claims is summarised with maps at Passport Party, 11 November 2020, <https://passportparty.ch/2020/11/11/tigrays-border-conflicts-explained/>. The Tigray account is summarised in a piece by Daniel Berhane, Horn Affairs, 5 June 2011 <https://hornaffairs.com/2011/06/05/reality-check-tigray-annexed-amhara-lands/>. This advances a Derg-era map of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN) to argue that “Gondar Province” was inhabited by Amharans and Tigrayans just as “Tigray Province” was inhabited by Tigrayans and Afars.

⁴¹⁴ Pro-Tigray Tghat media has documented what is claims are Amhara regional government leasing initiatives for the area, 18 May 2021, <https://www.tghat.com/2021/05/18/after-ethnic-cleansing-of-tigrayans-from-western-tigray-amhara-state-proceeds-to-sale-and-distribute-their-farmlands-to-amhara-investors/>

recover these areas in June 2020.⁴¹⁵ For many Amhara nationalists, including members of PP and NAMA, a key objective of the war has been the restitution of what they consider to be “ancestral” lands in Tigray, and the restoration of the old border of the Tigray Province of the imperial and Dergue eras, along the Tekezze River. They see the administrative area historically named Tigray as coincident with the “rightful” ethnic territory of Tigrayans, something the TPLF and Tigrayans reject.⁴¹⁶ For others, the annexation of land in western and southern Tigray since November 2020 now raises particularly complex issues of “just resolution of conflict” in the future.

Expansionist Amhara land claims reverberate more broadly across Ethiopia’s politics, well beyond Tigray. Over and above the issue of forced removal of the existing population, the effective expansion of Amhara region into Western (and Southern) Tigray would, if formalised, have serious implications for budgets, political representation, parliamentary seats, and the overall influence of Amhara at the national level. Other politicians will see this not only in relation to Tigray but in a broader context, with a knock-on effect on the federation. The quest for farmland underlies a number of tensions, either on the borders of the region, or where Amhara farmers have resettled (historically and during the 1980s) to other parts of the country.⁴¹⁷ They also have a regional implication. As Gumuz are pushed into Blue Nile state, Tigrayans into Gedaref and Kassala, and Beni Amer and others in Sudan are mobilised with the Sudan Armed Forces against “Amhara expansionism,” political dynamics internal to the Amhara region threaten to upend regional stability.⁴¹⁸

The flip side of this is that political narratives within the region, and amongst elites beyond its borders have been strongly coloured by anger and anxiety about ethnic targeting of Amharas in other parts of the country, including particularly (but not only) in Oromia (as discussed above) and in Benishangul Gumuz. Relations between the Gumuz and their Agaw, Shinasha and Amhara neighbours have long been complex, and a long history of slaving from the area has left a legacy bitterness between communities. When the federation was introduced in the early 1990s, Metekel zone of Benshangul Gumuz was carved out of what had historically been Gojjam Province. Inter-ethnic relations were also complicated by the presence in Metekel of large numbers of highland farmers, who had been settled into Pawe wereda from elsewhere during the Derg’s 1980s resettlement programme.

⁴¹⁵ <http://www.madote.com/2020/07/amhara-president-announces-plan-to.html>. See also Crisis Group, June 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b156-bridging-divide-ethiopias-north>

⁴¹⁶ As above, see Achamyeleh Tamiru, 2019, ‘The Wolkait Affair’ <https://www.amazon.com/Wolkait-Affairs-Achamyeleh-Tamiru/dp/1513653806> and Kalayu Abrha, AigaForum, 31 January 2021, <http://www.aigaforum.com/article2021/how-achamyeleh-killed-geography.htm>; also Passport Party, 11 November 2020, <https://passportparty.ch/2020/11/11/tigrays-border-conflicts-explained/> and Daniel Berhane, Horn Affairs, 5 June 2011 <https://hornaffairs.com/2011/06/05/reality-check-tigray-annexed-amhara-lands/>

⁴¹⁷ For the remarkably inflammatory claim that “Wollega is Amhara” see the veteran politician Dawit Wolde Giorgis’s interview with Abebe Belew, 21 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X2UIvv6JAc>

⁴¹⁸ Compare also Rights for Peace, March 2021, ‘Discrimination and Hate Speech fuel violence in Sudan’ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/b476a0_7aeedba08ff4732806c833b72879cbc.pdf

Settlers complained in the 1990s that the new arrangements under federalism discriminated against them, denying them proper representation, and the issue went as far as the Council of Constitutional Inquiry and House of Federation. Relations stabilised in the context of intensive peace building work in the late 1990s and 2000s, but the controversy remained. With the mobilisation from 2018 of the large Amhara Special Force under Asamnew, which some observers saw as “*out of control*” of either regional government, conflict reignited: arguably less a function of ethnic difference than of poor local management of incendiary political interests.⁴¹⁹ A Gumuz militia soon emerged, some even suggesting that it was deliberately fomented. In April 2019, violence in Dangura wereda of Metekel zone⁴²⁰ sent IDPs into neighbouring Awi zone; large scale revenge killings in Gumuz villages in Jawi wereda of Agaw Awi were then reported.⁴²¹

Escalating violence

Social media claims of #AmharaGenocide in Metekel began to circulate. In October 2020, Deputy PM Demeke publicly called on civilians in the area to form militia to defend themselves from attacks by armed groups.⁴²² On 9 December 2020, the Benishangul Gumuz regional government began arresting Benishangul Gumuz officials it said were complicit in conflict - from the former Gumuz Vice President Adgo Amsaya to the PP head for Metekel zone. On 17 December 2020, sources claimed that a Benishangul Gumuz administrator was abducted by Amhara special forces who camped around the areas of Jawi and Menta Wuha on the border. In Guangua district in Agaw Awi zone, the communications bureau reported Gumuz attacks on civilians in Jawi wereda.

On 22/23 December 2020, a concerted armed attack killed a large number of highland civilians, in Bikuji kebele of Bullen wereda (Metekel). The EHRC reported that armed men killed more than 100 people, largely from the Shinasha ethnic group, setting houses on fire while people were asleep inside and using firearms (NAMA claimed more than 200 were killed). Over 100,000 IDPs were displaced from Dibate, Bullen and Mandura, as well as Wombera and Guba, between July 2020 and January 2021.⁴²³ The EHRC investigation found there were no security personnel assigned to the area at the time of the attacks. As the PM travelled to Metekel at the same time in late December, a participant in a town hall meeting he chaired said in a statement, later posted to Facebook, that *Fano* groups and militia under the late Gen. Asamnew Tsigé had sought the expulsion of the Gumuz from Ethiopia “claiming they were Sudanese”, and were taking the opportunity to burn Gumuz houses as the ENDF focused on Tigray. The depth of tension which has now been ignited in the

⁴¹⁹ Tsega Etefa, *The Conversation*, 16 March 2021, <https://theconversation.com/whats-causing-the-violence-in-western-ethiopia-156970>

⁴²⁰ OCHA, Access Snapshot Metekel zone, November 2020,

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_191202-metekel_awi_snapshot_december_2019.pdf

⁴²¹ Addis Standard, 3 May 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/news-several-dozens-killed-in-jawi-woreda-amhara-regional-state-deputy-pm-demeke-describes-it-a-tragic-retaliation/>, The Ethiopian Reporter, 11 May 2019,

<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/violence-benishangul-amhara-boarder-towns>

⁴²² Reuters, 13 October 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/12-people-killed-in-western-ethiopia-as-deputy-pm-calls-on-people-to-arm-themselves>

⁴²³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-region-flash-update-6-january-2021>

area is unlikely to be settled soon. The Amhara regional government leads a Command Post which administers Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz region under emergency powers: an estimated 7,000 refugees had moved into Sudan's Blue Nile State by February 2021.⁴²⁴

In March 2021, violence erupted in the Oromo zone of Amhara to the east, around Atayé town and the Kemissie area, killing around 200 people in April, displacing an estimated 358,000 civilians,⁴²⁵ and further ethnicising bitterness also in that area. The scale of the violence seems to have been significant, much greater than earlier rounds of tension.⁴²⁶ Conflict erupted in Atayé town when on 19 March 2021 an Oromo Imam was killed outside his mosque. It escalated over the subsequent days, with aggressively contradictory political rhetoric at national level. Diametrically opposing explanations of the violence emerged from the two wings of the ruling party: the Amhara PP blamed "OLF/Shanee and TPLF" for the violence, and the Oromo PP squarely blamed the Amhara Regional Government's Special Forces.⁴²⁷ Their rhetoric seems to reflect community anger and fear on all sides⁴²⁸ and violence continued and escalated into April, as massive displacement continued. Local sources are quoted as saying that "*it did not come out of the blue. It was a war. Each side was attacking the other.*"⁴²⁹

At the beginning of April, the Amhara regional president claimed that the OLA was now operating in Amhara region, with the tacit support of some in the Oromia regional government, and called on the federal government to take emergency measures.⁴³⁰ OLA denied categorically that its forces are active in that area, alleging a fabricated excuse for "ethnic cleansing,"⁴³¹ and influential diaspora Oromo nationalist activists have drawn an explicit parallel with "ethnic cleansing" and land expropriation in Western Tigray.⁴³² Whatever the truth of the matter, Amhara sources blame "OLF Shanee" (OLA) attacks, whilst Oromos blame Amhara special forces. Lives and livelihoods lie in ruins.

⁴²⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2021/2/6034c92c4/thousands-ethiopians-seek-asylum-sudans-blue-nile-state.html>

⁴²⁵ Ethiopia's Ombudsman Endale Haile indicated up to 200 deaths in further violence in April, with 250,000 displaced in Simien Shoa zone of Amhara and 78,000 in the Oromo zone of Amhara, *Al-Jazeera*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/25/ethiopias-amhara-region-ethnic-violence-death-toll-hits-200>. The figure for displaced was later revised up to over 400,000, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210603-it-was-a-war-ethnic-killings-cloud-ethiopia-s-election-buildup>

⁴²⁶ *Addis Standard*, 9 April 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-horrifying-accounts-of-violence-in-amhara-region-fed-ombudsman-slams-regional-govt-performance-says-303-killed-so-far/>

⁴²⁷ *Addis Standard*, 23 March 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-oromia-pp-accuses-amhara-region-forces-of-fomenting-violence-in-oromo-zone-says-ola-rebels-not-present-as-pm-abiy-pleads-for-calm/> and 24 March 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-oromia-pp-engage-in-war-of-words-as-relative-peace-returns-to-violence-hit-areas/>; Several observers on both sides of the dispute have seen a "drama" staged in the heated dispute in parliament, to benefit the PM who remained above the fray (personal communications).

⁴²⁸ Oromos injured in the violence have reportedly been taken as far as Adama, travelling via Afar, for treatment in locations they consider "safe."

⁴²⁹ *France24*, 3 June 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210603-it-was-a-war-ethnic-killings-cloud-ethiopia-s-election-buildup>

⁴³⁰ *Addis Standard*, 1 April 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-alert-amhara-region-president-warns-fed-govt-to-look-for-solution-to-stop-amhara-killings-wants-emergency-meeting/>

⁴³¹ OLA spokesman quoted by *Vice World News*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93ybyy/they-set-everything-on-fire-the-paramilitary-forces-killing-people-theyre-meant-to-protect>

⁴³² For instance, cf. Free Oromia podcast, episode 22, 'Stand up for Wallo,' 26 March 2021, <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcyc5idXp6c3Byb3V0LmNvbS8xNDQ3NDUwLnJzcw?sa=X&ved=0CAkQlvsGahcKEwi4tbeBgs7wAhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQ&hl=en-GB>

Meanwhile in May 2021, there have been unconfirmed social media reports of fighting and killings between Qimant minority and Amhara security forces in Gondar, Chilga, and Aykel, a continuation of a brutal conflict which peaked in late 2018.⁴³³ The Qimant minority had lobbied since the 1990s for a separate administrative district uniting their disparate villages and giving them a voice at regional level. The government in Bahr Dar finally granted self-administration status for 42 kebeles/sub-districts in Gondar and surroundings. However, self-administration claims persisted from additional Qimant-community inhabited kebeles, and some regional politicians believed they saw interference from Tigray. After violence escalated from 2016, and pressure for a settlement built from the federal government, a referendum was held in September 2017.

This did not resolve the issue, and violence continued through 2018. In the second week of February 2019, 56,000 people were displaced in West and Central Gondar. After Asamnew's death in mid-2019 and the reshuffles of September and October 2019, the mood shifted. The regional Security Council called for the intervention of federal security forces to end repeated violence in West and Central Gondar zones, the city of Gondar, and the Qimant administration. This decision seemed to acknowledge that partisan regional security forces could no longer arbitrate in the Qimant conflict. Nevertheless, in October 2019 another 22 people were killed in clashes between ANRS forces and the Qimant near Gondar.⁴³⁴

Identifying drivers of conflict and assessing the land claims of Amhara populations is now exceptionally divisive nationally: where some see evidence of "Amhara genocide" others claim that Amhara politicians have themselves been involved in fomenting conflict – to encroach on land in unstable areas, or to discredit "ethnic" federalism.

On the face of it, meanwhile, within the Amhara region, much of it⁴³⁵ looked set to have amongst the most competitive elections in the country in June 2021, with these polarising narratives interacting with local competition in complex ways. The ruling Prosperity Party faced at least two parties with relatively strong local constituencies, which represent a key "duality" of Amhara politics: the pan-Ethiopianist Ezema, and the Amhara nationalist NAMA. Ezema's pan-Ethiopianist predecessor CUD polled strongly in Amhara in 2005, with many observers believing that it won the vote in the region (it clearly faced very significant violent intimidation); but there are signs that (until recently) the organization struggled to gain traction or win support in the region. Until 2015, Amhara political sentiment was broadly seen as aligning with a pan-Ethiopianist vision, but a younger generation of ethno-nationalists have been drawn to the more "assertive" (some would say exclusionary) politics of NAMA. In

⁴³³ Crisis Group, 12 June 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b156-bridging-divide-ethiopia-north>

⁴³⁴ Giulia Paravicini, Reuters, 3 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-violence/attacks-kill-22-in-ethiopia-amhara-region-party-official-idUKKBN1WI20I?edition-redirect=uk>

⁴³⁵ Eight constituencies in Oromia and Simien Shoa zones affected by recent violence will not conduct elections <https://addisstandard.com/news-electoral-board-issues-list-of-40-constituencies-in-six-regions-where-elections-wont-take-place-per-schedule/>

the run up to the June poll NAMA complained of unfair pressure from the ruling PP, and this can be expected to increase if their electoral popularity also seems to increase. They are reported to have presented a number of complaints to NEBE.⁴³⁶

During the first few months of the war in Tigray, the Amhara ruling PP seemed to have won strong popular support in the region because of its militarily assertive policy, the “restoration” of “Amhara land” (see above), and by placing few demands on farmers. Gondar and parts of Gojjam were thought to be particularly supportive. The mood in Wollo and Simien Shoa may have shifted after heavy conflict and displacement around the Oromia zone in March and April 2021 caused communities to reassess who would “best protect” them. But elections were postponed in these areas. As pre-election analysis concluded, at least in those areas where elections did then take place in June *“there are no insurgent groups actively roaming the forests and mountains of Amhara. The opposition, although many experienced arrests in the wake of the June 2019 violence, remain largely free – but the regional political issues remain no less complex and uncertain.”*⁴³⁷

5.6 The south, east and west

The Southern Region

The ruling EPRDF organisation in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) joined the PP in November 2020, although there are a number of key politicians who are thought to have been less than enthusiastic. Politics in the region has been complicated by agitation for the establishment of separate regions out of this “federation within a federation,” with the Sidama region finally inaugurated earlier in 2021. The ruling party now seems likely to push for a constellation of a further five states, reasonably similar to that which applied during a brief period in 1991/92. A referendum on the formation of a new South West region was scheduled to be held in the Kaffa, Sheka, Bench Sheko, Dawro, West Omo zones and Konta special wereda at the same time (and instead of) national and regional elections in those areas, but the vote was postponed for September due to ongoing conflict.⁴³⁸ The plans will see winners and losers, and have seen particularly vigorous opposition in Wolayita, triggering the detention of zonal politicians, and demonstrations and deaths especially in August 2020.⁴³⁹

Elections in many parts of the region were likely to see a contest between the ruling PP and Ezema, which is thought to be particularly strongly entrenched in the SNNPR, especially (but not only) in its urban areas. The opposition polled

⁴³⁶ Addis Standard, 26 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-five-opposition-parties-who-participated-in-this-weeks-general-election-complain-about-electoral-process/>

⁴³⁷ Anonymous, *Ethiopia Insight*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/07/amhara-nationalism-at-the-polls-in-ethiopia/>

⁴³⁸ In June 2021 NEBE postponed the referendum, eliciting anger, see Addis Standard, 11 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-local-officials-denounce-postponement-of-south-west-region-referendum/> See also UNOCHA, 15 May 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MDRET025do.pdf>

⁴³⁹ Reuters, 10 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-protests-idUSKCN2562EQ>

particularly strongly in Guraghe zone in 2005, and the same support could be expected for Ezema in 2021. Meanwhile, opposition *Medrek* leader Beyene Petros called for a rerun of the poll the week after it was held.⁴⁴⁰ Support for the ruling party would in principle have been expected likely to suffer across the region as a result of longstanding corruption and poor governance in the region, and political foot-dragging over the “separatist” zonal agendas, although protestant communities may have supported the PM, and (Muslim) Silte zone’s politicians are still prominent at federal level. The Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) may have benefited from its campaign for separate statehood, and ongoing frustration about a slow division of resources, and the relatively limited benefits which have so far accrued to the new region. Results remain to be seen.

As already noted above, violent conflict with the neighbouring West Guji zone (Oromia) affected the Gedeo zone in 2018, and many remain displaced, with insecurity rising again in recent months. Konso has also been hit by sporadic fighting in July, September, November and December 2020, with multiple deaths, and displacing almost a hundred thousand.⁴⁴¹ Karaté town authorities imposed a curfew in May 2021 to combat “lawlessness.”⁴⁴² Since an attack by unknown gunmen in October 2020 killed 31 Oromo and Amhara farmers at Gura Ferda, west of Tepi town, the newly created “Bench-Sheko zone” (amalgamating several pre-existing zones in September 2020, apparently with the intention of forming a new “South West Ethiopia” region subject to referendum) has also faced escalating insecurity.⁴⁴³ Incompetent management (or no management) of tensions over political restructuring as well as local animus have seen “ethnic others” often targeted.

5.7 Somali Region

Ethiopia’s Somali region arguably benefited more from the change of government in 2018 than any other region. The federal removal of a brutal existing regional President in August 2018 saw a new President appointed, who had returned from exile in Kenya, amidst a wave of euphoria. Also returning were the leaders, rank and file and long-exiled supporters of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), who had left government and returned to armed struggle in the 1990s, when their call for a referendum on independence was quashed.⁴⁴⁴ Reform of a brutal regional special police force was promised, and diaspora Somalis flocked to do business in a newly deregulated economic space. Trade, including contraband, boomed, and the Ethiopian Somali region’s natural international linkages with the rest of the Somali arena flourished – perhaps for the first time in Ethiopia’s modern history.

⁴⁴⁰ *Addis Standard*, 26 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-five-opposition-parties-who-participated-in-this-weeks-general-election-complain-about-electoral-process/>

⁴⁴¹ *Addis Standard*, 23 November 2020, <https://addisstandard.com/news-dozens-of-civilians-killed-in-sustained-konso-zone-violence-more-than-94-000-displaced/amp/>

⁴⁴² *Addis Standard*, 7 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-mayor-of-karat-city-konso-zone-imposes-curfew-to-curtail-lawlessness-organized-crime/>

⁴⁴³ *New Humanitarian*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/23/ethiopia-tigray-fuel-conflict-hotspots-ethnic-politics>

⁴⁴⁴ Aden Abdi, *Conciliation Resources*, October 2019, <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/one-year-moving-war-peace-ethiopia>

The optimism of 2018 and 2019 has given way to greater concern and cynicism as elections were postponed in 2020,⁴⁴⁵ and then in the run-up to polls planned in May, then in June 2021, and postponed again in regional constituencies to 6 September 2021.⁴⁴⁶ Opposition parties, including but not only the ONLF, have all voiced complaints of harassment and intimidation.⁴⁴⁷ Relations between the regional government and NEBE also suffered when NEBE decided not to hold elections in the 30 polling stations in 8 kebeles affected by Afar-Somali conflict.⁴⁴⁸ There have been controversies over the number of registered voters in the first half of 2021: voter registration was suspended in 7 constituencies amidst allegations of systemic irregularities.⁴⁴⁹ Problems escalated to such a level that in April 2021 three very diverse opposition parties (ONLF, Ezema, and the Freedom and Equality Party), and independent candidates in the region took the unusual step of writing a joint complaint.⁴⁵⁰ The Somali region held the most free and fair election in Ethiopian history in the early 1990s, and it remains to be seen whether this entirely exceptional event can be repeated.

A very serious period of conflict along the borders between the Somali region and neighbouring Oromia killed hundreds and displaced more than a million over the period from 2016 to 2018.⁴⁵¹ A long-disputed process of attempted border demarcation between two regions of pastoral communities with long histories of movement and inter-mingling offered fuel for political elites to ignite violence, in the period of heightened ethno-national consciousness and political contestation that brought the new PM to power. Here again, *“Inter-ethnic strife [was] driven by interests that emanate from other places, namely regional and national elites.”*⁴⁵² New governments in both regions, with new sets of interests, have been at pains to restore positive relations since 2018. Conflict has subsided, although many remain displaced, and ongoing resource claims are likely.

More recently Afar-Somali conflict re-erupted in relation to the three towns on the main Djibouti road which are within the borders of Afar but long claimed by the Somali region: Gedamaitu (Amibara), Undufo (north in Gewane) and Adaitu (north again in Mille). The towns are potentially lucrative entrepôts for informal Somali trade and contraband to access the asphalt highway and Ethiopia’s highland markets. As informal trade in the Somali region has boomed since the new regional

⁴⁴⁵ Tobias Hagmann, *CRP Briefing Paper*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Hagmann-Two-years-after-lley-final.pdf>

⁴⁴⁶ *Addis Standard*, 11 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-defect-in-ballot-papers-leads-to-postponed-election-in-dozens-of-constituencies-somali-region-sw-referendum/>

⁴⁴⁷ Khalif Abdirahman, *LSE Blog*, 25 March 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2021/03/25/election-prospects-in-somali-region-ethiopia/>

⁴⁴⁸ Bruk Abdu, *The Ethiopian Reporter*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/board-slams-somali-region-after-it-threatened-boycott-election>

⁴⁴⁹ *Addis Standard*, 18 May 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-as-electoral-board-reckons-with-delays-and-voters-registration-malfunction-riddle-the-process-eus-final-decision-is-to-send-no-mission-at-all/>

⁴⁵⁰ *Addis Standard*, 20 April 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-once-hailed-as-peaceful-somali-region-embroiled-in-election-fiasco-poor-human-rights-handling-of-detainees/>

⁴⁵¹ Tobias Hagmann and Mustaphe Mohammed Abdi, *CRP Research Memo*, March 2020

<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Inter-ethnic-conflicts-SRS-Final-April-2020.pdf>

⁴⁵² Tobias Hamann and Mustaphe Mohammed Abdi, March 2020.

government was established in mid-2018, the commercial significance of the towns has returned, and violent conflict with it.⁴⁵³ “About a hundred civilians” were reported killed in April 2021, primarily in Gewane,⁴⁵⁴ and national elections were quickly excluded in the 30 polling stations in the disputed areas.⁴⁵⁵ Pressure over the Afar-Somali border and conflict with Somalis in Shinille zone is longstanding, and Afar see a historical pattern of Somali encroachment towards the Awash river: also a matter of vigorous – and violent - dispute.

At the end of June 2021, it remained to be seen whether (and when) the election could be held in the Somali region without recourse to violence. The balance between the large Ogaadeen clan, and other smaller clans in the region has often influenced politics in the region (and drawn in meddling from Addis Ababa): since 2009, regional government and the ONLF have both been led by Ogaadeen politicians, and this remains the case in this contest, a change in the constellation of the cast of protagonists notwithstanding. The political dispensation amongst non-Ogaadeen clans may again prove crucial to the formation of a new regional government post-election. In the wake of polls elsewhere, many observers at the end of June 2021 considered the outcome of Somali region elections in September increasingly unlikely to influence the national outcome, but this remains to be seen.

5.8 Afar Region

The establishment of the PP in November 2019 formally brought Afar politicians into the ruling party at national level: as in Somali region, a locally popular move that also gave Afar individuals (including women) federal portfolios.⁴⁵⁶ Regional President Awol Arba was not a newcomer. He had earlier replaced his longstanding predecessor in 2015, and the PP largely took over the existing structures of the EPRDF-affiliated ruling party, the Afar People’s Democratic Party (APDP).

There *was* a significant turnover of political appointees and administrative staff at local level in Afar woredas during 2018, and (as in some other regions) a new generation of younger cadres came into local administration. They combined enthusiasm and optimism about the future with a lack of experience, and little indication of a new strategy for institutional development or what might change in practice. At the regional level, meanwhile, changes seem to have been more of a reshuffle, with more independent minded politicians replaced by those amenable to federal pressure. A spate of arrests at the end of 2019 ensured that the shifted constellation (which initially ruffled clan feathers) could settle in, and the pre-existing cadre system continued to operate, with apparently limited change in practice.

⁴⁵³ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afar_issa_flash_update_27_01_2021.pdf

⁴⁵⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/7/dozens-killed-in-clashes-in-ethiopias-afar-somali-regions>

⁴⁵⁵ https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa_politics/2021/03/29/electoral-board-under-increasing-strain-from-regional-tensions,109653736-art

⁴⁵⁶ The Civil Engineer Aisha Mohammed Musa was briefly Minister of Defence, before being moved to Construction and Urban Development.

Afar clans have taken a pragmatic approach to multi-party politics, each ensuring that it placed its key people in all of the contending ruling and opposition parties, to cover all eventualities. It is unlikely this strategy will change. Apart from the Afar chapter of the ruling PP, other political actors include the opposition Afar Liberation Front (ALF), The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF) and the Afar People's Party (APP). ALF is closely associated with the Alimirah family (Awsa Sultanate with a historical base at Assaiyta) which fought the military regime through the late 1970s and 1980s; two of its members held the regional presidency from 1991 to 1996, before being replaced by an EPRDF ally who remained in position for nearly 20 years. ARDUF, also known locally as Uguguma, conducted armed operations in the "internal periphery" along the western border between Afar and neighbouring Tigray and Amhara. The organisation was thought to have been bought off in the 2000s, under a deal cut to allow commercial access to the salt pans at Afdera and Berahale.

The ALF and ARDUF were both registered with NEBE to compete with the PP and Ezema for the upcoming elections, along with the APP (which returned from Eritrea with its 400 fighters in 2016) and an Afar Peace and Democracy Party (APDP). APP in particular has been outspoken in its social media criticism of alleged strong-arm ruling party politics, and "fully rejected the whole process" in the wake of the June poll.⁴⁵⁷ Ezema's predecessor, the opposition CUD, gained some support in the urban centres in Afar region in 2005, and they were fielding candidates again the region. Little is known about the reach of Ezema into Afar clan networks. On the face of it, a competitive election was not likely to be in prospect, with voting likely to accord with a pre-arranged deal between clans, cemented via the distribution of food aid.

The Eritrean opposition Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO) was based in Ethiopia during the EPRDF period but is thought to have been expelled since the peace-deal between Asmara and Addis Ababa. Afars live in all three states of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, and secessionism has long complicated the politics of the region. Afar politicians felt that they lost influence on the Ethiopian state with the loss of the port of Assab when Eritrea seceded in 1993, and access stopped with the outbreak of war in 1998. Plans to reopen Ethiopian use of Assab at some point in the future could change the pattern of Afar winners and losers, in unpredictable ways. Meanwhile, social media commentators alleged at the beginning of June 2021, that Afar regional bodies were also keen to annex land on the border with Eastern Tigray, reports which have not been confirmed. Afar loyalty forms an important plank of any national federal strategy to encircle Tigray.

5.9 Benishangul Gumuz

The ruling party in Benishangul Gumuz (B-GPDUF), which had been allied with the ruling EPRDF, joined the PP when it was established in November 2019. The existing regional President, Alshadli Hasen (Berta) had been appointed in 2016. He remained

⁴⁵⁷ *Addis Standard*, 26 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-five-opposition-parties-who-participated-in-this-weeks-general-election-complain-about-electoral-process/>

in position but removed many of his cabinet after the change of government in 2018, including a number of well-qualified Shinasha.

The balance of power between the five (controversially) so-called “indigenous” groups (Berta, Gumuz, Mao, Komo and Shinasha) and large populations of other “settler” groups (Amhara, Oromo, Kambatta and Tigrayan) dominates political sensitivities in the region. Whilst the constitutional arrangement nominally invests political power in the former, economic power and job opportunities have tended to remain with the latter. Sensitivities have been further exacerbated by disputes over land, and the demarcation of the region’s borders. In 1991 Benishangul Gumuz was carved from the pre-existing provinces of Gojjam (north of the Nile) and Wollega (south), a dispensation accepted neither by Gojjami Amhara nor by Wollega Oromos, as noted above. Land sensitivities expanded greatly when large tracts of land in the region were allocated to commercial investors both domestic and foreign, after 2001/2.

The geopolitical salience of Benishangul Gumuz has increased with the establishment of the GERD within the region. Recent tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan have seen Sudan realign itself with Egypt in the dispute over the filling of the dam and use of Nile waters. Benishangul Gumuz is host to around 65,000 refugees from Blue Nile (Sudan) and Upper Nile (South Sudan).⁴⁵⁸ As noted above, the area north of the Nile (Metekel zone) remains under an emergency Command Post, and no election was to be held here in June. NEBE at the beginning of June 2021 added Kamashi zone to the list.⁴⁵⁹ In the zones south of the Nile, the Benishangul Gumuz ruling PP was unlikely to face strong opposition, although Ezema was fielding candidates in urban and settler areas. A longstanding opposition grouping, the Benishangul Gumuz People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM or Behenen), has strong roots in Berta-related communities in Damazien in Sudan. Although it agreed to return to electoral politics after 2018 and formed an alliance with a number of other smaller ethno-nationalist parties, its status remains uncertain.

5.10 Socio-economic stakes and the cost of the war

An overall assessment of the economic impact of the war, and of Ethiopia’s economy in the face of the wider patterns of conflict described above, lies beyond the scope of this paper. In a jaw-dropping speech on 29 June 2021, however, PM Abiy stated that his government had spent 100 billion Birr over and above the war. This is roughly equivalent to US Dollars 2.3 billion or 18% of Ethiopia’s current annual budget of 561.7 billion Birr.⁴⁶⁰ This figure would clearly give a substantial jolt to even the healthiest economy, and most robust political settlement.

⁴⁵⁸ UNHCR, *Regional Sitrep*, June 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/benishangul-gumuz-region-situational-update-june-2020>

⁴⁵⁹ *Addis Standard*, 1 June 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-election-will-not-to-take-place-in-four-constituencies-in-benishangul-gumuz-snnps-rises-to-seven-board-updates-status-for-others/>

⁴⁶⁰ on the increase and scale of the budget this year see Reuters 5 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-budget-idUSL5N2NN05Y>. The speech was later posted on the official Twitter account of the office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia at <https://twitter.com/PMEthiopia/status/1410164100752187394?s=20>

Economic factors, however, will clearly be critical to the country's ability to withstand and recover from what EU Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen in June 2021 called the *"shaking of its whole fabric."*⁴⁶¹ Economic updates as recently as March 2021 focus not on the war or wider conflict but on the economic impact of COVID-19, and the implications of an associated collapse in global demand.⁴⁶² These reportedly drove a 4.1 percent reduction in merchandise exports (excluding gold) during July-December 2020, and a 20 percent decline in FDI during Financial Year 2020. A broadly upbeat analysis nevertheless acknowledges that Ethiopia requested debt treatment under the G-20 common framework and that *"downside risks to this outlook loom large due to internal conflict."*⁴⁶³

Recent analysis of Ethiopia's debt position observed that *"investors and creditors have for years underplayed the political risks in Ethiopia. With the outbreak of conflict in Tigray, continued turmoil in Oromia, and the regional tensions around the government's flagship investment – Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam – these are now impossible to ignore. In the meantime, the government's response to these challenges has so far been inconsequential, with exercises such as the launching of the Ten-Year Pathway to Prosperity Plan that appears to be detached from the contingency of reality. It is doubtful that the ambitious goals set in the plan are going to be met when, according to OCHA, 23 million Ethiopians are currently in need of humanitarian assistance."*⁴⁶⁴

Ethiopia's key vulnerability lies precisely here: in the scale of actual and potential poverty and food insecurity. The latest World Bank update acknowledges that *"against a backdrop of a large vulnerable population, a shock across the country that reduces household consumption by 10 percent would, all else being equal, raise the poverty rate by 6 percentage points. This would bring about 6.5 million people into poverty, reversing all the progress made in poverty reduction between 2011 and 2016."*⁴⁶⁵ These risks have been well established, and long documented. As the world waits to see whether food supplies will be allowed to reach starving Tigrayan at the end of June 2021, the stakes could not be higher. Acute risks also pertain to the wider national picture.

Almost eight months into the war in Tigray it is salutary to return to a comprehensive analysis of national trends and potential developmental scenarios up to 2030, which was conducted in 2016/17.⁴⁶⁶ This concluded that *"the possible consequences of the Crisis and Stalled Development scenarios paint an alarming picture. In the Stalled Development scenario, there could be roughly 14% more Ethiopians living in poverty, GDP per capita could be approximately 8% lower and Ethiopia's HDI score could be nearly 3% lower in 2030 relative to the Current Path. In the Governance Crisis scenario,*

⁴⁶¹ Jutta Urpilainen, 10 June 2021, at the EU-US High-level roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/content/us-eu-high-level-roundtable-humanitarian-emergency-tigray_en

⁴⁶² World Bank, "Ethiopia 8th Economic Update: Ensuring Ethiopia's Resilient Recovery from COVID-19", March 2021, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/672121619537898959/pdf/Eighth-Ethiopia-Economic-Update-Ensuring-Resilient-Recovery-from-COVID-19.pdf>

⁴⁶³ World Bank 8th Economic Update, March 2021, p.ix

⁴⁶⁴ Federico Rogai, "Ethiopia's debt: an economic and political liability," *Ethiopia Insight*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/05/10/ethiopias-debt-an-economic-and-political-liability/>

⁴⁶⁵ World Bank 8th Economic Update, March 2021, p.ix

⁴⁶⁶ Jakkie Cilliers et al., "Ethiopia Development Trends Assessment" ISS and International Futures for USAID, March 2017, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/ethiopia-assessment.pdf>

*there could be about 25% more people living in poverty in Ethiopia, GDP per capita could be 25% lower, and the country's HDI score could dip by more than 4%, relative to Ethiopia's current development trajectory. Finally, in the combined Crisis Scenario, Ethiopia could be facing more than a 50% increase in extreme poverty, a 29% reduction in GDP per capita and a 6% reduction in its HDI score, relative to the [2016] Current Path in 2030."*⁴⁶⁷

Ethiopia must create two million jobs a year to keep pace with the number of young people entering the workforce; the most optimistic analysis suggests it is meeting less than one-third of that target.⁴⁶⁸ In this context, migration to the Gulf has been described as a "release valve," and one which has steadily closed as Gulf states have placed blocks on informal migration.⁴⁶⁹

It is in this socio-economic context that *Addis Fortune* on 30 May 2021 reported that Amhara region was requesting two billion Ethiopian Birr (around US\$ 47 million) for reimbursement of the costs of the medical treatment of members of the Ethiopian forces injured in the war.⁴⁷⁰ At the beginning of June Ethiopia approved an 18% rise in its annual budget,⁴⁷¹ but little is known about off-budget financing arrangements or international support. Observers can be forgiven for wondering just what scale of human and financial cost the country will pay for the deep political crisis of which the war in Tigray is a part; and for speculating about just how – and at whose expense – this charge will be met.⁴⁷²

5.11 Concluding remarks

Well-placed commentators⁴⁷³ and important political stakeholders⁴⁷⁴ have noted that the war in Tigray is only "*the tip of the iceberg*" of conflict and political crisis across Ethiopia. This paper documents these others conflicts: that dominant narratives about why are often superficial, and that they are always violently contested. It suggests that central tensions emerge not from "criminality" or "ethnic conflict" but rather from profound political divisions about the desirable shape of the Ethiopian state; from the current regime's determination to marginalise and exclude uncompromising "federalist" stakeholders on one side of this political argument;

⁴⁶⁷ Cilliers et al., "Ethiopia Development Trends Assessment", March 2017, p.156.

⁴⁶⁸ USIP, Senior Study Group, 29 October 2020, p.38 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/final-report-and-recommendations-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea>, citing Lauren Kelly and José Carbajo Martinez, "Can Ethiopia Create 2 Million Jobs Every Year?," World Bank Independent Evaluation Group, September 4, 2018, <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/blog/can-ethiopia-create-2-million-jobs-every-year>; International Crisis Group, "Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition," February 21, 2019, www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia/269-managing-ethiopias-unsettled-transition

⁴⁶⁹ USIP, Senior Study Group, 29 October 2020, p.28 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/final-report-and-recommendations-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea>

⁴⁷⁰ *Addis Fortune*, 30 May 2021, <https://addisfortune.news/amhara-region-places-two-billion-br-in-war-recompense/>

⁴⁷¹ Reuters, 5 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-budget-idUSL5N2NN05Y>

⁴⁷² See for instance, Alex de Waal, interviewed by Telile Dange of KMN, 17 February 2021 <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/02/17/interview-with-alex-de-waal-2/> "What I fear will happen is the Ethiopian government will start offering large scale areas of land, please come buy our land, you can control this land so that we can have a little bit of cash to bail out our ailing economy to pay our army etc Danger.. These are the types of things that a desperate government will do."

⁴⁷³ René Lefort "Ethiopia's vicious deadlock," *Ethiopia Insight*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/27/ethiopias-vicious-deadlock/>

⁴⁷⁴ Oromo Liberation Front, statement 28 April 2021, cited in *Addis Standard*, 29 April 2021 <https://addisstandard.com/news-ofc-olf-call-for-dialogue-national-consensus-before-elections-ola-calls-for-ceasefire-and-preconditioned-national-dialogue/>

and from its active political failure to manage and avert known conflict risks in good faith.

For many observers (on both sides of the political divide about “ethnic” federalism), the 2018 transition, and its culmination in the 2021 election was a second attempt by pan-Ethiopianist groupings to wrest control of, and potentially to reshape, a multinational federation that does not serve their interests: in essence an “Act Two” designed to succeed where they failed to take power in 2005. A year ago, as the “transition” evolved, one such commentator saw a “2005 Redux,” and warned *“this time the risk is higher than 2005. The political narrative is no longer dominated by Addis Ababa and its Amharic-speaking elite. Indeed, the narrative is not even occurring in Amharic. It is clear now there are at least three main political power bases: Tigray and Afar; urban elites, including the PM himself; and the Oromo-dominated south. Add the heightened political consciousness produced by protest movements, social media, and regional structures, and Ethiopia’s political constituency looks sharply demarcated.”*⁴⁷⁵

Over the intervening year since that commentary was written, violent political engineering achieved a dramatic weakening and discrediting of two of those three power bases – each at terrible ongoing cost: Tigray by means of the war; and what the commentator calls the “Oromo-dominated South” as a result of the clampdown on popular opposition post-Hachalu. It would be perverse not to look for the active hand of the third bloc in deliberately effecting these changes. The ground for these violent political exclusions has been laid incrementally over a lengthy period, and with a depth of propaganda and occlusion that has generated a fevered public enthusiasm. In 2005 the gamble was arguably confined to the ballot box: in 2018-2021 it has proved much more extensive and ambitious, and much more destructive in its scope.

That the regime, and the Ethiopian nationalist “bloc” has had external support from Eritrea in achieving its ambitions – in Tigray clearly, and now allegedly also in the theatre of conflict in Oromia – was an unexpected but all-too-intelligible aspect of the “transition.” Much depends on one’s view of Eritrea’s President Isaias and his likely motivation vis-à-vis Ethiopia: analysis which also lies beyond the scope of this paper.⁴⁷⁶ For anyone in doubt, Worku Aberra’s hair-raising account of the Ethio-Eritrean “common market” period from 1991-98, offers a further useful corrective to the saccharine rhetoric of Ethiopia’s current leaders.⁴⁷⁷

On 28 May 2021, the ruling Prosperity Party stated that *“the main aim of the bodies who don’t want to see the civilisation of Ethiopia is to create a weak Ethiopia. Towards this end*

⁴⁷⁵ Anonymous, *Ethiopia Insight*, 22 May 2020 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/05/22/for-ethiopias-political-tribes-its-2005-redux/>

⁴⁷⁶ For the view that he is behind the war, see Goytom Teklu, ‘Ethiopia’s Treacherous Transition’ *Ethiopia Insight*, 21 March 2021 <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/03/19/ethiopias-treacherous-transition/>; see also Alex de Waal, interviewed by Kush Media, 11 February 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/1199689540205069/videos/456704648804436>. For a more positive view of Isaias’s potential role and influence in Ethiopia see Andargachew Tsige’s interview with BBC’s Hardtalk, where he claims to have influenced PM Abiy’s decision to do business with President Isaias <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJv1NermBEY>

⁴⁷⁷ Worku Aberra, ‘Asymmetric Benefits: the Ethio-Eritrea Common Market (1991-1998)’ <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=ijad>

they use three methods: use every opportunity to put Ethiopia into war with its neighbouring countries, to weaken Ethiopia's economy and to create conflict among Ethiopians based on religion and regionalism."⁴⁷⁸ An alternative analysis is that these are precisely the processes in which (knowingly and perhaps unknowingly) the ruling and opposition politicians cultivating the popular narrative of Ethiopian sovereignty in the run up to national polls have colluded: in an attempt to undermine the federal arrangement, and demonise their ethno-nationalist opponents.

Treating the war in Tigray in isolation from Ethiopia's wider political developments undermines analytical understanding of its political drivers and complexities: of the deeper power and ideational struggle of which it now forms a part. The narrative from Addis Ababa since the current Prime Minister came to power in March 2018 sought to separate the TPLF from other political actors. Ironically, the barbarity of the war has elicited a symmetrical desire for "uncoupling" on the part of a Tigrayan diaspora now mobilised in support of Tigray's eventual independence of Ethiopia. This has been an impassioned response to the atrocity which has been the hallmark of the war – but also to the failure of other Ethiopian friends, neighbours and colleagues to call out these evils, a silence which has added insult to deep injury. After almost eight months of brutalisation, many Tigrayans say that they can no longer see a place for themselves in Ethiopia. Whether this view can evolve depends critically, at the time of writing, on whether the urgent delivery of emergency food and medicines reaches Tigrayans living in areas controlled by the Tigray regional government. In broader terms, meanwhile, it is hard to see how an Ethiopia as violently divided as it is in mid-2021 charts an inclusive future capable of drawing out the pain of all those affected by conflict.

The hope that elections might somehow provide a conclusion or resolution of Ethiopia's crisis has preoccupied Ethiopians and outsiders for years. The US government in June 2021 expressed itself "gravely concerned" that the opposite may be true, given an electoral environment in which polarisation has hardened.⁴⁷⁹ Abadir Mohammed Ibrahim has argued that *"going into transitional elections in a divided society before agreeing on core constitutional issues was never a good idea. If normal elections are a contentious process, transitional elections in which the "social contract" has not been negotiated risk turning into referenda on constitutional matters."*

Arguably, in this case partial June polls have now offered a referendum in which (in many places) only one side of the constitutional argument could be selected. But Abadir is also right to argue that Ethiopia is now well beyond the sequencing problem, and that elections will do nothing to resolve Ethiopia's longstanding inability to move towards a politics of inclusion and consensus. Ethiopia, he notes, needs *"a system in which its heterogeneous members have mutual assurances that their core interests are secure from being obliterated by the whims of electoral politics"* – or indeed by war. This paper has set out the devastating scope of the consequences of the failure to achieve this beyond Tigray. We can only conclude with Abadir, that *"Ethiopia may*

⁴⁷⁸ Statement of the Executive Committee of the Prosperity Party, 28 May 2021, <https://fb.watch/5MHS2Y0q8i/>

⁴⁷⁹ Reuters, 11 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-says-it-is-gravely-concerned-about-ethiopia-elections-2021-06-11/>

*not collapse in the coming weeks or month. But that prospect is heightened with every mistake that is repeated.*⁴⁸⁰

6. Diplomatic Efforts

By Habte Hagos and Martin Plaut

Introduction

As the fighting in Tigray began the diplomatic effort to try and contain and then halt the dangerous conflict got underway. It would rapidly involve all the facets of the international community: from the African Union based in Addis Ababa to the European Union in Brussels and the UN in New York. In addition to these multinational initiatives, there were interventions from individual states. The scale of this involvement was justified: the conflict threatened far more than Ethiopia; it puts in jeopardy the whole of the Horn of Africa.

6.1 UN Security Council and the African Union

UN Security Council held the first of several meetings on 24 November.⁴⁸¹ No formal statement was issued and the meeting only went ahead at the insistence of the European members, with African states reportedly refusing to facilitate the discussions. “South Africa asked for time so that the envoys can conduct their consultations and refer the matter to the African Union. A statement could complicate the situation,” an African diplomat declared after the session.⁴⁸² In May 2021 President Ramaphosa was still hoping that the former African presidents whom he had nominated as peacemakers might be able to proceed with their work, but without any indication that the Ethiopians would accept the proposal.⁴⁸³ South Africa’s International Relations and Cooperation Minister, Naledi Pandor, posed the possibility that the mission might be rejuvenated once the Ethiopian elections, scheduled for June 2021, were out of the way.

While the African states prevaricated, the European Union began to increase the pressure on Prime Minister Abiy. The EU had provided Ethiopia with €815 million for the 2014-2020 budgetary period, plus more than €400 million from the EU Trust Fund for Africa.⁴⁸⁴ These funds gave officials in Brussels hope that this might persuade the authorities in Addis Ababa to de-escalate the conflict. An EU official said a political decision would be made in the coming weeks on whether or not Addis Ababa should continue to qualify for budgetary support from Brussels. “We are keen to have a common EU position on this,” the official said. “There will be

⁴⁸⁰ Abadir Mohammed Ibrahim, *Ethiopia Insight*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/09/ethiopias-tortuous-path-to-democratization/>

⁴⁸¹ <https://www.channelstv.com/2020/11/24/un-security-council-holds-first-meeting-on-ethiopias-tigray/>

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/ramaphosa-hoping-peace-envoys-can-return-to-ethiopia-naledi-pandor-20210527>

⁴⁸⁴ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/african-union-au/87066/demonstrating-europe%E2%80%99s-commitment-africa_en

consultation between the capitals and there could be a decision to stop budgetary support.”⁴⁸⁵

The United States, among Ethiopia’s most important foreign partners, quickly expressed its concern about the war. But the Trump administration had never much engaged in African matters, and at the outset of the conflict it simply endorsed the Eritrean and Ethiopian view of things. In addition, the conflict erupted just as the US was caught up in one of its most bitter presidential contests in recent times: the electoral race between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, which culminated in balloting on the very days that the war began. Trump instantly disputed the Biden victory, leading to a crisis in domestic governance – possibly the gravest since the American Civil War – and to many additional weeks of diplomatic disarray. In a word, American attention was focussed elsewhere. As the Biden administration began forming in preparation to assume office, however, it not only turned head-on to addressing the Tigray conflict but reversed the U.S. position – to one highly critical of Ethiopian and Eritrean conduct. At this writing, the U.S. remains keenly critical, keenly engaged, and perhaps cautiously hopeful of progress toward a solution.

The European Union followed up its warnings to Ethiopia by suspending \$107 million worth of aid until humanitarian agencies were granted unfettered access to Tigray.⁴⁸⁶ The EU’s senior diplomat, Josep Borrell, said Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed now needed to act. “We are ready to help, but unless there is access for humanitarian aid operators, the EU cannot disburse the planned budget support to the Ethiopian government,” Borrell said. To reinforce its concerns Europe sent the Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto to Addis Ababa, to try and gain access to Tigray for aid.⁴⁸⁷ The initiative did not go well. On his return, he said the crisis appeared “out of control”. “You have come to the situation which is militarily and human rights-wise, humanitarian-wise very out of control,” Haavisto told journalists in Brussels.⁴⁸⁸ Ethiopia reacted furiously.⁴⁸⁹ Hirut Zemene, Ethiopia’s ambassador to the EU, rejected the Finland’s foreign minister’s claims that the violence and suffering were “out of control”, describing them as “erroneous”.

6.2 The United States of America

The U.S. and Eritrea have had a somewhat hostile relationship for over a decade, but Ethiopia is a different matter. U.S. friendship toward, interests in and strategic reliance upon Ethiopia have been profound, enduring, and seemingly graven in stone. Ethiopia has served as not only a loyal U.S. ally but a somewhat stable anchor in the volatile Horn. It has also served as a partner in the struggle against militant Islam – which, among other things, in 1998 claimed U.S. embassy targets in Kenya and Tanzania. Ethiopia is also proximate to important U.S. markets and security

⁴⁸⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-considers-aid-cut-to-ethiopia-amid-conflict-violence/>

⁴⁸⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-eu/eu-suspends-ethiopian-budget-support-over-tigray-crisis-idUSKBN29K1SS>

⁴⁸⁷ <https://www.devex.com/news/eu-to-dispatch-humanitarian-negotiator-to-ethiopia-after-aid-suspension-98934>

⁴⁸⁸ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-envoy-warns-ethiopia-tigray-crisis-out-of-control/>

⁴⁸⁹ <https://euobserver.com/foreign/151150>

interests in the Middle East, as well as the vital shipping channels of the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. But clouds have appeared. Increasingly, for the U.S., Ethiopia has become a theater of Chinese economic and diplomatic competition. In addition, after an impasse appeared in the U.S. mediated negotiations between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (the GERD), the U.S. took the side of its other ally Egypt. Most specifically, on 23 October, 2020 – virtually the eve of the Tigray war – President Trump tweeted that Egypt might and probably should “blow up” the dam, and Ethiopia responded with outrage.⁴⁹⁰ The American response to the war in Tigray must be viewed from all those vantages. Whether the U.S. can sufficiently navigate its own national needs while facilitating a just, secure and humane outcome in Tigray will be a twin test of America’s conscience and its resourcefulness.

At the outset of the war, within the U.S. government, congressional voices were perhaps the first to publicly react. On 5 November, the day after the start of the war, the ranking (i.e., senior minority) member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives (the lower American legislative house) – a Republican – voiced his concerns.⁴⁹¹ The following day, six Democrats in the House expressed theirs.⁴⁹² On 12 November, the Republican chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate (the upper legislative house) followed in kind.⁴⁹³ On 18 November, that committee’s leading Democrat did the same.⁴⁹⁴ Bicameral, bipartisan congressional statements proceeded to gather force, growing more outraged at Ethiopian and Eritrean behavior as the weeks wore on and as atrocity reports mounted. Such was a rarity in the fraught American political discourse at that time, as it continues to be as of this writing. Altogether, to this date, several dozen members of Congress have weighed in, through dozens of joint and individual statements.

What motivated the members of Congress? No broad, grass-roots awareness of or concern for Tigray had arisen. Rather, some members likely were responding to calls for action by their constituents of Tigrayan and Eritrean descent. Such “ethnic” inputs have long figured in the formulation of U.S. foreign affairs – e.g., in Poland, Ukraine, Cuba, Taiwan, Israel, and quite recently India. Affected legislators have felt duty-bound to serve constituent interests, to serve their own re-election prospects, or both. In the matter of Tigray, however, many or most who spoke out probably acted from general principles – that is to say, through leadership, even absent broad popular concern. The first aim was to calm a potential melt-down in the Horn, which would not serve the U.S. well. The second was America’s vision of itself since the end of World War II as leading the march toward global human rights and democratization – a vision that remains deeply embedded in Washington, notwithstanding the country’s many failures in that regard, and notwithstanding the Trump administration’s four-year abandonment of that calling almost entirely. The

⁴⁹⁰ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ethiopia-blasts-trump-remark-egypt-blow-dam-73801774>

⁴⁹¹ <https://gop-foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-on-escalating-violence-in-ethiopia/>

⁴⁹² <https://bass.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/members-congress-weigh-regarding-political-instability-ethiopia>

⁴⁹³ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/chairman-risch-all-sides-must-cease-fighting-pursue-dialogue-in-ethiopia>

⁴⁹⁴ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/ranking-member-menendez-statement-for-the-record-on-preventing-conflict-and-supporting-democratic-transition-in-ethiopia>

memory of American and global failures relative to such human rights calamities as Bosnia, Darfur and Rwanda also seems fresh for some in that city. Those who serve on congressional foreign relations and foreign affairs committees have seemed particularly committed to the post-World War II vision, and in their tasks for their respective committees they seemed at least somewhat resistant to the hyper-partisanship of the Trump era. Of note, in the early weeks of the conflict in Tigray, Congress appeared to be ahead of the administration in sensing the gravity of what was unfolding, and it found itself urging administrative action. Even after the administration became fully engaged, and fully critical of the atrocities occurring in-theater, congressional statements continued – although by then, conceivably, not so much to urge diplomatic action by the administration as to support and amplify it, by lending the imprimatur of the popular (congressional) will.

The administration's early public statements, however, conveyed the opposite – a nonchalance, and a seemingly blurred perception of what was occurring. Even before the polls had closed on 3 November, the president himself was fully engaged in contesting what he claimed was a stolen election. His secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, was distracted as well, possibly in part by the sudden change in his personal fortunes. On 4 November, Pompeo used Twitter to condemn the TPLF's attack on the ENDF's Northern Command base.⁴⁹⁵ On 15 November, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs, also by Twitter, condemned the TPLF's alleged missile attack on Asmara.⁴⁹⁶ On 17 November, Pompeo again blamed the TPLF, and went so far as to praise renegade Eritrea for its forbearance from retaliating against the Tigrayans.⁴⁹⁷ The administration clearly perceived villains in the fray, but they weren't Eritrean or federal Ethiopian forces.

What was missing from this perspective? Tigrayan refugees were already flooding into Sudan.⁴⁹⁸ On 12 November, Amnesty International had reported a massacre at Mai Kadra.⁴⁹⁹ On 13 November, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights had warned of chaos, heavy casualties, mass displacement and the commission of war crimes.⁵⁰⁰ On 19 November, a group of 17 senators wrote to Pompeo, expressing fears of a humanitarian catastrophe. The senators also urged Pompeo to engage directly with Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy, with a view to pursuing an immediate ceasefire, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, and respect for international humanitarian law.⁵⁰¹ On the same day, President-elect Biden's incoming (but not yet confirmed) secretary of state, Antony Blinken, tweeted about the humanitarian crisis and regional risks.⁵⁰² By 20 November (if not earlier), reliable reports were emerging that Eritrea was participating in the war and that the Eritrean

⁴⁹⁵ <https://twitter.com/secpompeo/status/1324121664108580875?lang=en>

⁴⁹⁶ <https://twitter.com/AsstSecStateAF/status/1328015362999414786>

⁴⁹⁷ <https://www.barrons.com/news/pompeo-blasts-tigray-forces-praises-eritrea-over-ethiopia-fighting-01605631507>

⁴⁹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-refugees.html>

⁴⁹⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

⁵⁰⁰ <https://africatimes.com/2020/11/13/uns-bachelet-warns-tigray-attack-may-amount-to-war-crimes/>

⁵⁰¹ <https://www.vanhollen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%2011%2019%20SecState%20re%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Conflict.pdf>

⁵⁰² <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict/stop-ethiopia-war-and-help-civilians-biden-team-urges-idINKBN27Z18O>

refugee camps in Tigray were under attack.⁵⁰³ On 23 November, Chris Coons – a leading Democratic senator and a personal friend of President-elect Biden – telephoned Abiy, presumably at Biden’s request.⁵⁰⁴ On 25 November, the incoming (also not yet confirmed) national security adviser Jake Sullivan Tweeted about war crimes and humanitarian needs.⁵⁰⁵ By then Abiy appeared to have been misleading, and believed by, some of the most senior officials at both the U.S. and the U.N.: about the progress of the war, about humanitarian access, and about Eritrea’s participation in the fighting.

Not until 30 November, did Pompeo call Abiy to express his “grave concern,”⁵⁰⁶ then Tweet that he had urged of Abiy an end to the fighting, a start of dialogue, and allow unhindered humanitarian access.⁵⁰⁷ On 23 December, the State Department announced that it was providing new funding for humanitarian assistance, calling for unhindered humanitarian access, condemning violations of international law, and urging the protection of Eritrean refugees in Tigray.⁵⁰⁸

At the same time, the domestic U.S. crisis in governance was still aflame. President Biden was nevertheless inaugurated without incident on 20 January 2021. It soon became apparent that Biden as determined to get to grips with the crisis in the Horn: both the war in Tigray and the controversy over the Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile – the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam – which was causing such consternation in Khartoum and Cairo.

Within days, the State Department reiterated its call for an end to the fighting and for unhindered humanitarian access; but now it added calls for Eritrea to leave Tigray, and for human rights investigations to begin.⁵⁰⁹ On 26 January, Antony Blinken was confirmed as secretary of state, and – with something approaching lightning speed, on 4 February – he called Abiy and urged humanitarian access.⁵¹⁰ On 19 January, at his congressional confirmation hearing, Blinken had already expressed his dismay about Tigray and about the safety of Eritrean refugees there. He also had noted that the U.S. was now engaged, rather than “being AWOL” – a pointed rebuke, it appeared, of the preceding administration.⁵¹¹ On 19 February, the U.S. said that it would tie further economic assistance to Ethiopia to that country’s conduct in Tigray.⁵¹² The State Department on 25 February again condemned the human rights violations, again called for the protection of refugees, and again asked

⁵⁰³ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-interferes-in-civil-war-in-tigray-region-of-ethiopia/>; https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn_18-November-2020.pdf

⁵⁰⁴ <https://www.coons.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-coons-speaks-with-ethiopian-prime-minister-amidst-escalating-conflict>

⁵⁰⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ethiopia-biden-nsa-pick-jake-sullivan-warns-against-war-crimes-n1248944>

⁵⁰⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-usa/pompeo-voices-grave-concern-about-ongoing-tigray-hostilities-idUSKBN28A2HA>

⁵⁰⁷ <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1333457228624519170>

⁵⁰⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/united-states-humanitarian-assistance-response-conflict-ethiopia-s-tigray-region>

⁵⁰⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-coronavirus-pandemic-africa-ethiopia-kenya-83b90a145d271eb39d664726bd5acbe5>; <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-egypt-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-kenya-e3f47fc14084da52daea64fe078deaa6>

⁵¹⁰ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy-2/>

⁵¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/aman.luul/videos/10222373157296458s>

⁵¹² <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-egypt-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-kenya-e3f47fc14084da52daea64fe078deaa6>

that Eritrean forces be withdrawn.⁵¹³ On 26 February, The New York Times reported (presumably by way of a deliberate leak) that the U.S. government had determined that Ethiopian federal forces and allied militia fighters were conducting a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing.⁵¹⁴ On 27 February, Blinken again condemned the atrocities and the humanitarian crisis, reiterating the call for a ceasefire, humanitarian access, and human rights investigations.⁵¹⁵

State Department denunciations of the atrocities continued.⁵¹⁶ On 1 March, Biden's new U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Linda Thomas-Greenfield, decried what she referred to as "conflict-induced starvation."⁵¹⁷ On 2 March, Blinken called Abiy, pressing for the protection of civilians, an immediate end to hostilities, the withdrawal of Amhara and Eritrean forces, and the commencement of independent human rights investigations.⁵¹⁸ At the U.N. Security Council, on 4 March, Thomas-Greenfield called for a halt to the atrocities.⁵¹⁹ On or around that date, Blinken reportedly called Abiy again.⁵²⁰ On 10 March, he publicly told Congress that ethnic cleansing was occurring, that a reconciliation process and an independent human rights investigation were essential, and that Eritrean and Amhara forces needed to leave.⁵²¹ The following day Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council starkly that the hunger crisis in Tigray was "man-made."⁵²²

In the end (although in truth it was only the beginning), the Trump administration's distraction, credulousness and nonchalance had been fully reversed by its successor administration. By several accounts, the U.S. diplomatic engagement with the war in Tigray had become one of its most serious priorities in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, the endeavor was stymied. Abiy was simply not responsive to American or to any other diplomatic pressure. The State Department, meanwhile, was not yet adequately staffed, having been impeded in that project by the Trump administration during the presidential transition, and now further impeded by the avalanche of domestic crises besieging the White House: including the coronavirus pandemic. Short-staffed and departing from protocol, Biden requested that Senator Chris Coons, an old friend, to visit Abiy in Addis Ababa on his behalf.⁵²³ Coons arrived on 20 March.⁵²⁴ The move seemed hopeful and bold. Afterwards Coons

⁵¹³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/02/25/tigray-eritrea-ethiopia-crime-against-humanity/>

⁵¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>

⁵¹⁵ <https://www.state.gov/atrocities-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

⁵¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/02/25/tigray-eritrea-ethiopia-crime-against-humanity/>;

<https://www.state.gov/atrocities-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

⁵¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/USAmbUN/status/1366521830098534409>

⁵¹⁸ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy/>

⁵¹⁹ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210304-un-alleges-war-crimes-in-ethiopia-s-tigray-urges-eritrea-pullout> ; <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-the-un-security-council-virtual-stakeout-following-security-council-discussions-on-ethiopia/> .

⁵²⁰ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-98-05-March-2021.pdf>

⁵²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-diplomacy-blinken-ethiopia-idUSKBN2B22M3>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/10/politics/blinden-tigray-ethnic-cleansing/index.html> ; <https://news.yahoo.com/blinden-condemns-ethnic-cleansing-ethiopia-220414116.html>

⁵²² <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-high-level-open-debate-on-conflict-driven-hunger/>

⁵²³ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/18/biden-chris-coons-senator-ethiopia-tigray-crisis/>;

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-biden-idUSKBN2BA21F1>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/18/biden-dispatches-us-senator-to-ethiopia-over-humanitarian-crisis>

⁵²⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-delegation-top-ethiopian-officials-discuss-tigray-conflict>

claimed some progress: that Abiy had agreed to international dialogue and had condemned the ongoing human rights violations.⁵²⁵ In addition, within days Abiy publicly acknowledged the presence in Tigray of Eritrean forces ⁵²⁶ – a seeming predicate to agreeing to remove them from his country. But that was all. Nothing more eventuated, and Coons soon expressed disappointment – no ceasefire, no acknowledgment of ethnic cleansing.⁵²⁷ And no international dialogue began. A sense of disheartenment and deflation appeared to emanate from the U.S. government.

But presently momentum returned. On 16 April, Thomas-Greenfield challenged the Security Council with these words: "Do African lives not matter as much as those experiencing conflict in other countries?"⁵²⁸ On 22 April, China and Russia allowed a Security Council resolution calling for "a scaled-up humanitarian response and unfettered humanitarian access" as well as "a restoration of normalcy." The resolution also expressed "deep concern about allegations of human rights violations and abuses, including reports of sexual violence against women and girls"; and it urged "investigations to find those responsible and bring them to justice" together with "full compliance with international laws."⁵²⁹ It was a start. Ireland had drafted the resolution.⁵³⁰ Thomas-Greenfield, who appeared to have done much of the heavy lifting, was plainly thrilled.⁵³¹ As of 20 April, the U.S. had committed some \$305 million in humanitarian assistance for Tigray.⁵³²

On 23 April, Biden appointed Jeffrey Feltman, a seasoned diplomat, as Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa, with an immediate mandate to engage on Tigray.⁵³³ On 26 April, Blinken again called Abiy, and he again demanded the withdrawal of Eritrean forces.⁵³⁴ Three days later Feltman left on a tour of the region, which included discussions about the GERD in Egypt and Sudan.⁵³⁵ On 6 May, Feltman had met with Isaias in Asmara⁵³⁶ and by 10 May with the Ethiopian Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonnen in Addis.⁵³⁷ The Asmara event marked the first high-level meeting between the U.S. and Eritrea in years.⁵³⁸ During the same period, Coons and another U.S. senator held high-level meetings in Sudan.⁵³⁹

⁵²⁵ <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-march-23-2021/#post-228243-ETHIOPIA>

⁵²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56497168>

⁵²⁷ <https://news.yahoo.com/ethiopia-rejected-u-call-unilateral-225629610.html> ; <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-appeals-cease-fire-ethiopias-tigray-rejected>

⁵²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sexual-violence-being-used-weapon-war-ethiopias-tigray-un-says-2021-04-15/>

⁵²⁹ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14501.doc.htm>

⁵³⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-security-council-notes-concern-over-humanitarian-situation-tigray-2021-04-22/>

⁵³¹ <https://twitter.com/USAmbUN/status/1385322141772652551>

⁵³² <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-raising-alarm-looming-humanitarian-crisis-ethiopias-war/story?id=77068798>

⁵³³ <https://www.state.gov/special-envoy-for-the-horn-of-africa/>

⁵³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/blinken-presses-ethiopias-abiy-ensure-full-withdrawal-eritrean-troops-tigray-2021-04-26/>

⁵³⁵ <https://www.wral.com/us-envoy-in-sudan-in-a-bid-to-resolve-ethiopia-s-dam-dispute/19665662/> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-envoy-in-sudan-in-a-bid-to-resolve-ethiopias-dam-dispute/2021/05/07/33d2e160-af34-11eb-82c1-896aca955bb9_story.html

⁵³⁶ <https://shabait.com/2021/05/07/president-isaias-afwerki-receives-american-delegation/>

⁵³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/MFAEthiopia>

⁵³⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-envoy-heads-horn-africa>

⁵³⁹ <https://the arabweekly.com/sudan-visit-eritreas-president-discusses-tensions-ethiopia> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/6/ethiopia-replaces-head-of-war-hit-tigray-region>

Despite these initiatives ethnic cleansing and other atrocities continued. The U.S. (like Europe and the U.N.) appeared frustrated that its efforts were not bearing fruit. Chinese competition and other geo-strategic interests loomed large on the horizon. Russia and China continued to block more direct and effective action at the Security Council. The U.S. did pause most of its non-humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, and it linked a resumption of that assistance to progress on humanitarian matters.⁵⁴⁰ It had imposed a range of sanctions against Eritrea and on 23 May, Blinken announced that visa restrictions would be imposed on Ethiopians involved implicated in the atrocities in Tigray, and their families.⁵⁴¹ The Ethiopian authorities – stung by the rebuke – issued a formal statement saying that the measures “send the wrong message” at a time when the country is gearing up for elections.⁵⁴²

The sanctions announced on 23 May are clearly not the last measure in the US armory. President Biden is reported to be considering cutting financial support via international organisations, including the World Bank and IMF.⁵⁴³ Since Ethiopia is the biggest recipient in Africa of U.S. foreign aid, receiving about \$1 billion last year, Washington has considerable clout. The U.S. administration plans to ratchet up the measures, with further sanctions planned if the situation does not improve. This was made clear at a Senate hearing on 27 May.⁵⁴⁴ The Acting Assistant Secretary of State and head of the Bureau of African Affairs, Robert Godec, made clear in his testimony, that unless human rights were observed, aid was allowed to proceed and Eritrean forces removed “Eritrea and Ethiopia can expect further action.” Godec also said that President Biden’s special envoy, Jeffrey Feltman, would be returning to the Horn of Africa in early June, to try to end the crises in Tigray and on the Nile.

6.3 European Union

The European Union defines its relationship with Ethiopia as that of a key partnership. Not only for the EU but also for many individual member states, Ethiopia functions as a key aid partner in the Horn of Africa. The EU also seeks to have close relations with other countries in the Horn, including with Eritrea, with whom they have sought to implement a ‘dual track approach’ of political dialogue and aid funding through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Only recently, and after persistent criticism from human rights organisations and the European Parliament, has the EU withdrawn most of its aid to Eritrea.⁵⁴⁵

The EU reacted to the start of the conflict with expressions of concern and calls for ceasefire. In addition, the EU started funding for emergency assistance to refugees crossing into Sudan.⁵⁴⁶ The European Parliament chipped in on 26 November 2020

⁵⁴⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-usa-assistance/u-s-will-not-resume-assistance-to-ethiopia-for-most-security-programs-idUSKBN2B5070>

⁵⁴¹ <https://www.state.gov/united-states-actions-to-press-for-the-resolution-of-the-crisis-in-the-tigray-region-of-ethiopia/>

⁵⁴² <https://www.facebook.com/MFAEthiopia/posts/4741556492538223>

⁵⁴³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-22/u-s-weighs-financial-sanctions-against-ethiopia-over-tigray-war>

⁵⁴⁴ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?512141-1/hearing-tigray-conflict-ethiopia&live>

⁵⁴⁵ <https://www.devex.com/news/eu-pulls-eritrea-funding-citing-tigray-conflict-lack-of-interest-99743>

⁵⁴⁶ <https://europeansting.com/2020/11/19/tigray-conflict-eu-humanitarian-support-to-ethiopian-refugees-reaching-sudan-2/>

with an urgency resolution⁵⁴⁷ which mainly reiterated support for the African Union-led mediation efforts of the AU Special Envoys that had been appointed. In addition, the Parliament called for the “EU to continue to use all necessary diplomatic means to engage with the federal and regional authorities, as well as with regional partners and multilateral institutions, in order to resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner.”

European Commission representatives, mostly European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič and High Representative of the European Union Josep Borrell, gradually started using more forceful wording to express their concern over the conflict. Starting mostly with calls for peace talks and mediation, the main call from the EU gradually started revolving around humanitarian access. In December, the EU warned it would delay budget support to Ethiopia if the situation did not improve. On 15 January 2021, Borrell indicated that “possible war crimes” had been committed in Tigray.⁵⁴⁸ At the same time, the EU announced it had suspended budgetary aid to Ethiopia worth 88 million EUR, until Ethiopia would grant access to humanitarian organisations to deliver aid to Tigray.⁵⁴⁹

Around that same time, in the middle of January, EU representatives started to openly acknowledge the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray.⁵⁵⁰ However, it only called for Eritrea to withdraw its troops after the US had done so.⁵⁵¹

The EU followed up the halting of budget support and the calls for Eritrean troops to withdraw by a renewed attempt at diplomatic engagement in the form of an EU special envoy: Finnish foreign minister Pekka Haavisto.⁵⁵² Haavisto had experience and contacts in the region. Haavisto visited the region in early February 2021, going on a Horn-tour starting with a visit to refugees who had fled the conflict.⁵⁵³ He debriefed EU Ministers on 22 February 2021. In comments in the days following the debriefing, Haavisto led on that he saw the situation as “out of control” and relating that Ethiopia’s government had not provided a “clear picture” during his visit.⁵⁵⁴ The Ethiopian embassy in Brussels sent a letter to DEVEX in complaint of the wording used by Haavisto, who had stated Ethiopia was ‘in denial’ over Tigray.⁵⁵⁵

Despite Haavisto’s strong words, EU Ministers delivered a mixed message in the European Council conclusions of 11 March 2021. This is hardly surprising, given the diverse nature of the EU and how keen some states are to retain links with Ethiopia for trade and commerce. It was also difficult for diplomats to make a sharp U turn; from regarding Abiy as an exemplary leader and Nobel Prize winner to a war-monger, responsible for the so many atrocities. The EU leaders firstly stressed

⁵⁴⁷ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0330_EN.html

⁵⁴⁸ <https://news.yahoo.com/eus-borrell-says-possible-war-164629285.html>

⁵⁴⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-eu-idUSKBN29K1SS>

⁵⁵⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/91459/%20We%20need%20humanitarian%20access%20to%20Tigray%20as%20urgent%20first%20step%20towards%20peace%20in%20Ethiopia

⁵⁵¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-09/eu-accuses-eritrea-forces-of-fueling-conflict-in-ethiopia-region>

⁵⁵² <https://www.devex.com/news/eu-to-dispatch-humanitarian-negotiator-to-ethiopia-after-aid-suspension-98934>

⁵⁵³ <https://www.eepa.be/?p=4801>

⁵⁵⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-envoy-warns-ethiopia-tigray-crisis-out-of-control/>

⁵⁵⁵ <https://ethiopianembassy.be/letter-to-the-editor-of-devex/>

“Ethiopia’s important role as a strategic partner and a key multilateral actor,” and reiterated their “great concern regarding the situation in the Tigray region and the wider region” after.⁵⁵⁶ The Council concluded that the EU wished to pursue a constructive dialogue with the Ethiopian government on these concerns. Many analysts saw the Council conclusions as a failure of the EU as a whole to decisively follow up on its words.

EU envoy Haavisto made another visit to the region in early April. This included a visit to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and he was also able to visit Mekelle. After the second visit, he warned the situation was dire. However, Josep Borrell indicated the EU wanted to send an election observation mission if the situation allowed.⁵⁵⁷

The EU has continued to stress the need for de-escalation and has threatened to impose sanctions, including asset freezes and visa bans, if UN workers would be blocked from delivering aid.⁵⁵⁸ Key messages of the EU remain: unrestricted aid access, investigation of human rights violations, withdrawal of Eritrean soldiers, ceasefire, and the start of discussions. It has also halted Eritrean development aid, partly due to the Tigray conflict, instead re-routing some of that funding to help refugees fleeing the Tigray conflict. At the same time, the EU seems to struggle with taking a firm stance, while not alienating a key partner in the region, Ethiopia, too much.

The EU fails to take a lead in making a stance, as shown by weak Council conclusions; this ensures that stronger EU calls fall on deaf ears. In addition, although EU countries such as Ireland are making a push for action in the UN Security Council, the EU does not - openly at least - make effective use of strategic alliances to make a stronger call for an end to the hostilities and human rights abuses.

5.4 Britain

Apart from the African Union, China, Russia and India, all major world players including the UN, the US, EU, G7 and others have condemned the horrific human rights abuses in the Tigray war. Britain, which has a long relationship with Ethiopia, has echoed these calls, but without going very much further. British - Ethiopian (Abyssinia) relations go back some two hundred years or more. During World War II, Ethiopia was under Italian occupation and Emperor Haile Selassie joined the resistance groups. From 1936 -1941, Haile Selassie was exiled to the city of Bath, England and eventually returned to power as emperor of Ethiopia in 1941 with the help of the British. Britain also played a major role in alleviating the terrible famine of 1984-85. Yet London has been remarkably reticent about applying any more than verbal pressure on Addis Ababa to end the conflict.

⁵⁵⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/11/eu-ethiopia-relations-eu-council-conclusions-stress-the-strategic-partnership-and-eu-s-deep-concerns-about-the-situation-in-the-tigray-region/>

⁵⁵⁷ <https://euobserver.com/world/151617>

⁵⁵⁸ Idem

This is the assessment of the UK's development department, Dfid, now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [FCDO]: *"the UK relies on a stable Ethiopia that is supportive of our foreign policy priorities in the Horn of Africa, particularly in relation to Somalia and South Sudan. Ethiopia is the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces in the world and particularly in its neighbourhood"*.⁵⁵⁹ The British government's position is very similar to that of the Ethiopian Embassy in the UK. The Embassy in its political-affairs section reaffirms that: *"over the centuries, Ethiopia has enjoyed close economic, diplomatic and cultural relations with the United Kingdom. ... Historically, Ethiopia and the United Kingdom have enjoyed rich diplomatic relations covering a range of areas, including, but not limited to, trade, culture, education and development cooperation"*.⁵⁶⁰

In return for this close friendship and cooperation between the two countries, the Ethiopian government has received billions of pounds in aid from the UK over the years. In 2019, Ethiopia received the second largest amount of foreign aid from the UK – £300 million - just behind Pakistan which received £305 million and above that given to Afghanistan of £292 million.⁵⁶¹ It is worth noting that while as many as 100 countries had their aid from Britain cut as the UK reneged on its commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on aid, Ethiopia was not among them.⁵⁶² Eritrea did not have its aid renewed in 2020/21, this was because of a decision not to fund spending on a major road project linking the Eritrean ports and Ethiopia because the Eritreans were using 'National Service' conscripts – a form of slave labour.⁵⁶³ The cut had nothing to do with the war in Tigray.

On 21 December 2020, while the EU was considering withholding aid from the government of Ethiopia due to the Tigray conflict, Lord David Alton of Liverpool asked the British Government, how much aid was given to Ethiopia; (a) last year and (b) over the past decade. In reply, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister of State FCDO, said *"the UK is engaging with partners, including the EU, on the implications of the current situation in Tigray on development and humanitarian assistance, which plays a vital role in supporting the provision of basic services and lifesaving support across the whole country. Ethiopia is the UK's largest aid programme, reaching millions of poor people while supporting UK interests. In Financial Year 2019/2020 [April 2019 to March 2020] the UK delivered £292 million in bilateral aid and about £3 billion over the last ten years"*⁵⁶⁴.

In January 2021 and in response to Eritrea Focus, James Duddridge MP, Minister for Africa, stated that the UK provided over £100 million of humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia in 2020/2021. This included £19 million on humanitarian assistance to provide food, shelter, healthcare and protection to those affected by the conflict in Tigray. The aid was provided via UN agencies and the International Committee of

⁵⁵⁹ www.gov.uk/world/organisations/dfid-ethiopia

⁵⁶⁰ <https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/political-affairs/ethiopia-uk-relations>

⁵⁶¹ DFID Ethiopia - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

⁵⁶² <https://pages.devex.com/rs/685-KBL-765/images/final-uk-cancelled-ODA.pdf>

⁵⁶³ <https://eritreahub.org/eritrea-focus-v-united-kingdom-success-in-halting-funding-for-eritrean-road-project>

⁵⁶⁴ [Ethiopia: Overseas Aid: 21 Dec 2020: Hansard Written Answers - TheyWorkForYou](#)

the Red Cross, rather than through the Government of Ethiopia. By June this figure had risen to £22 million.⁵⁶⁵

Although the British government says – repeatedly – that it has raised human rights issues with the Ethiopian authorities “at the highest level” and called for a cessation of the conflict, the authorities in London appear reluctant to go further.⁵⁶⁶ Both UK Houses of Parliament have been pro-actively engaged with the crisis in Tigray. In the seven months since the outbreak of the war they have raised the conflict and its consequences on at least ten occasions; six times in the House of Commons and four in the Upper Chamber (House of Lords) raising numerous questions with the government.⁵⁶⁷ The Foreign Secretary has written to and spoken with Prime Minister Abiy and other ministers have also played their part.

On 24 November 2020, two members of parliament, Laurance Robertson and Stuart McDonald, asked the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Rabb what recent assessment he has made of the; (a) political and (b) security situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia⁵⁶⁸. The Foreign Secretary provided a length reply along the following lines:

“We are very concerned about the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in terms of both the humanitarian impact and the risk of spill-over and spread through the region... I spoke to Prime Minister Abiy on 10 November. We have made it clear that there needs to be a de-escalation of violence, humanitarian access and protection of civilians. Of course, there are also all sorts of regional implications, which is why I have also spoken to the Prime Minister of Sudan and the Foreign Ministers of Egypt and South Africa. This will require not only regional but international efforts to secure peace and protect the humanitarian plight there. I share the hon. Gentleman’s horror at some of the reports of the civilian casualties. We take this incredibly seriously, energetically and actively at the United Nations. Let me reassure him that UK funding is already helping those in urgent need of assistance. In Ethiopia specifically, the UK funds the World Food Programme, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs”.

This answer broadly represents the UK’s position on the war in Tigray. Despite the deepening crisis and the danger of the conflict spreading across the Horn, the British government has refused to take a more robust stand. At present the UK has no financial sanctions against either Ethiopia or Eritrea, despite the mounting evidence of atrocities.⁵⁶⁹ The British are essentially awaiting a lead from the Americans, as reflected in this answer given by the African Minister, James Duddridge on 7 June.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁵ <https://www.davidalton.net/2021/06/08/tigray-uk-government-says-today-we-are-extremely-concerned-about-the-use-of-hunger-and-food-insecurity-as-methods-of-war/>

⁵⁶⁶ <https://www.davidalton.net/2021/06/08/tigray-uk-government-says-today-we-are-extremely-concerned-about-the-use-of-hunger-and-food-insecurity-as-methods-of-war/>

⁵⁶⁷ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/search?>

⁵⁶⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/search?>

⁵⁶⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/financial-sanctions-regime-specific-consolidated-lists-and-releases>

⁵⁷⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-05-25/7186>

“The Foreign Secretary discussed concerns about the situation in Tigray with Secretary of State Blinken on 3 May. We continue to closely engage US counterparts on the full range of human rights issues in Washington DC, Addis Ababa and in capital-to-capital discussions, including with the US envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman. We will continue to work closely with the US on this issue.”

The UK has worked to raise the Tigray conflict in the UN Security Council – mostly behind the scenes – but since India, Russia and China have repeatedly prevented any action against either Eritrea or Ethiopia, this has failed to make progress.⁵⁷¹ The March 2021 draft resolution made no mention of sanctions, merely noting “with concern” the humanitarian situation in Tigray, “where millions of people remain in need of humanitarian assistance” and the challenge of access for aid workers. It called for “the full and early implementation” of the Ethiopian government’s statements on February 26 and March 3 committing to “unfettered access.” Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because consultations were private, said China wanted the statement to focus only on the humanitarian situation, with no reference to the violence in Tigray. India only wanted a minor change, and Russia reportedly supported its ally China at the last minute, the diplomats said.⁵⁷²

The EU has cancelled millions of Euros worth of aid to Ethiopia, but the UK has been reluctant to follow this lead, despite calls for it from politicians. This issue was posed in a question by Viscount Waverley in the House of Lords at the start of the conflict: *“Is the world going to stand by yet again, knowing that mayhem is seemingly set to unfold, do nothing and then have to deal with the added consequences of regional instability and the combination of Somalia, Sudan and Yemen across the way ripe for Islamist groups or Governments to exploit?”*⁵⁷³ The call for action could not be clearer, but has not been heeded.

At the same time, there has been a considerable effort by the UK’s communities of Eritreans and Ethiopians to try to prevent the war from causing divisions between them. While – as in other locations – there are very different views in and among them, the British diasporic communities have managed to remain on relatively good terms. Demonstrations by Tigrayans in London have been large and supported by a substantial number of Eritreans.

5.5 Arab nations

The relationship between the Horn of Africa and the Arab nations of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa are ancient and deep. Egypt sent expeditions along the Red Sea coast to Eritrea in search of gold, ivory and incense as long ago as 2,500 BC. Egyptians founded the port of Adulis and the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches looked to Cairo for spiritual guidance. Arab nations traded across the Red Sea and the Al Negashi Mosque in Tigray is among the oldest in Africa, having been

⁵⁷¹ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-violence-india-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-f93a9a6bc7c0845a37cf7e3e3757e1e7>

⁵⁷² <https://apnews.com/article/russia-violence-india-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-f93a9a6bc7c0845a37cf7e3e3757e1e7>

⁵⁷³ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-11-24/debates/FC8557E3-517E-4CDD-9AA7-786A986F6AAA/TigrayConflict>

constructed by early followers of the prophet fleeing persecution in Mecca. In more recent times, Cairo was home to Eritrean nationalists pressing for their country's rights as early as the 1950's. Ethiopia came to suspect that the Egyptians were supporting Eritrean independence for duplicitous reasons. Ethiopians believed that Egypt was using the conflict with Eritreans as a means of diminishing the Ethiopian state and keeping the country poor, so that Addis Ababa was unable to use the waters of the Blue Nile, upon which Egypt was so dependent.

One element of the relationship with the Arab world was therefore distrust. Another was reliance. The Eritrean independence movement depended on Arab states for support as they fought the Ethiopian state. Arab nations from Syria to Yemen gave Eritrean movements training, some military equipment, financial and diplomatic support. Somalia provided diplomatic assistance. These relationships only increased Ethiopian concerns about the motivation of their Arab neighbours.

It is possible to see both elements at play today.

Eritrea's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE

President Isaias is nothing if not pragmatic about his foreign relations and he is willing to drop friends and change direction if it suits his purposes. His ties with Iran illustrate the point. In 2007 the President began cultivated his relations with Tehran. He made positive statements about Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, at a meeting of the Non-Aligned movement.⁵⁷⁴ In May 2008, President Afwerki met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad in Tehran to bolster cooperation between the two states. The Eritrean government granted Iran access to Assab Port, providing Tehran with a base from which to conduct maritime operations in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Iranian warships began to visit Eritrean ports.⁵⁷⁵ There were even suggestions from Eritrean opposition sources that Iranian arms were being supplied to Houthi rebels in the Yemen.⁵⁷⁶

Yet Eritrea also turned its back on its long-term relations with Iran when it did not suit them. Qatar took the lead in wooing Eritrea away from Iran. Qatar mediated a ceasefire between Eritrea and Djibouti in their conflict over their border conflict, and, in June 2010, sent 200 troops to the Eritrea-Djibouti border to monitor the settlement.⁵⁷⁷ Eritrea transferred its allegiance to the Saudis and the UAE – on the opposite side of the Sunni-Shia divide. President Isaias has been a visitor to Riyadh since 2015. In return the UAE and the Saudis have been allowed to build bases in the Eritrean port of Assab and to use Asmara airport for attacks on Yemeni forces.⁵⁷⁸ It is quite possible that these links go further, but this much at least is known.

⁵⁷⁴ https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/eritrea-iran-foreign-relations#_ftn1

⁵⁷⁵ by Fred H. Lawson, GCC Policies Toward the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Yemen: Ally-Adversary Dilemmas <https://www.oxgaps.org/files/analysis-lawson.pdf>

⁵⁷⁶ <http://www.yemenpost.net/Detail123456789.aspx?ID=3&SubID=1548>

⁵⁷⁷ by Fred H. Lawson, GCC Policies Toward the Red Sea, op. cit.

⁵⁷⁸ Eritrea maintained the base in Assab until early 2021, when it was dismantled, as the UAE pulled back from the war in Yemen. <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-dubai-only-on-ap-united-arab-emirates-east-africa-088f41c7d54d6a397398b2a825f5e45a>

In 2016, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported on “the rapid construction of what appears to be a military base with permanent structures” at Assab.⁵⁷⁹ According to security analysts, the base includes its own port, airbase, and a military training facility⁵⁸⁰, where the UAE has trained elite Yemeni forces⁵⁸¹, according to the Middle East Institute.⁵⁸² The UN Monitoring Group also reported that the base has “expanded to encompass not only personnel from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but also Yemeni troops and other troops in transit.”⁵⁸³ In return, the Eritreans are reported to have received aid from the UAE to upgrade their infrastructure.⁵⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch accused the UAE of torturing Yemenis on Eritrean soil.⁵⁸⁵

The UAE has been reportedly supported the Eritrean war effort in Tigray. It has been repeatedly claimed by the Tigrayan military that drones were flown from the UAE base to attack their troops and to hit their heavy artillery.⁵⁸⁶ This has not been supported by careful research by the open-source analysts, Bellingcat.⁵⁸⁷ As they concluded: “In sum, the claims made by the Tigray forces are not impossible, but so far they seem improbable. Satellite imagery confirms the presence of Chinese-produced drones at the UAE’s military base in Assab, but that is all it confirms. There is currently no further evidence that these same drones have been involved in operations in support of the Ethiopian air force, though there have been confirmed sightings of Ethiopian jet fighters in the conflict zone.”

Facilitating the Eritrea – Ethiopia alliance

Many nations and initiatives were involved in ending the bitter ‘no-peace, no-war’ stalemate that followed the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea border war.⁵⁸⁸

Some of the first moves came quietly from religious groups.⁵⁸⁹ In September 2020, the World Council of Churches sent a team to see what common ground there was on both sides. Donald Yamamoto, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, and one of America’s most experienced Africa hands, played a major role. Diplomatic sources suggest he held talks in Washington at which both sides were represented. The Eritrean minister of foreign affairs, Osman Saleh, is said to have been present, accompanied by Yemane Gebreab, President Isaias’s long-standing adviser. They are said to have met the former Ethiopian prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, laying the groundwork for the deal. Yamamoto visited both Eritrea and Ethiopia in April

⁵⁷⁹ <https://undocs.org/S/2016/920>

⁵⁸⁰ <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/>

⁵⁸¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates-idUSKCN0ZE1EA>

⁵⁸² <https://www.mei.edu/publications/horn-africas-growing-importance-uae>

⁵⁸³ <https://undocs.org/S/2016/920>

⁵⁸⁴ <http://www.madote.com/2015/05/djibouti-uae-diplomatic-crisis-brings.html>

⁵⁸⁵ <https://martinplaut.com/2017/06/25/fresh-evidence-of-eritrean-base-used-to-torture-yemeni-prisoners/>

⁵⁸⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/international-news-eritrea-ethiopia-asmara-kenya-33b9aea59b4c984562eaa86d8547c6dd>

⁵⁸⁷ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-drones-supporting-ethiopia-from-an-eritrean-air-base/>

⁵⁸⁸ <https://theconversation.com/conflict-between-tigray-and-eritrea-the-long-standing-faultline-in-ethiopian-politics-151042>

⁵⁸⁹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/eritrean-orthodox-tewahdo-church-hosts-wcc-delegation>

2018.⁵⁹⁰ Although next to nothing was announced following the visits, they are said to have been important in firming up the dialogue. But achieving reconciliation after so many years took more than American diplomatic muscle.

Eritrea's Arab allies also played a key role. Shortly after the Yamamoto visit, President Isaias paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2018, meeting King Salman.⁵⁹¹ Prime Minister Abiy also made a trip to see the Saudis the following month.⁵⁹² Formerly, little was revealed about the visit, with the bald official statement that "The Prime Minister held talks with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual concern."⁵⁹³ It was Abiy's first visit outside of Africa, and he followed it up with a visit to the UAE.⁵⁹⁴ Abiy is reported to have taken an important initiative during his time in Riyadh.⁵⁹⁵

"He said while in Saudi Arabia he has asked the crown prince to help to bring peace between the two countries. PM Abiy told the participants, after he promised the crown prince that Ethiopia will abide by the Algiers Agreement if the regime in Asmara can sit down to talk on other issues, the crown prince tried to call Isaias Afeworki. The call was not returned but he is hopeful with Saudi and US help the issue will be resolved soon."

The door to peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea was beginning to swing open, with the Americans, Saudis and the UAE playing critical roles. On 3 July 2018 President Isaias, following PM Abiy's footsteps, visited the Emirates.⁵⁹⁶ There are suggestions that large sums of money were offered to help Eritrea develop its economy and infrastructure.

What was discussed in confidence in the UAE has not been revealed, but less than a week later, PM Abiy arrived in Asmara for the first visit by an Ethiopian leader since the border war ended eighteen years earlier.⁵⁹⁷ On 14 July, President Isaias made a return visit to Addis Ababa: the hostility and enmity of nearly two decades was at an end.⁵⁹⁸ The relationship was sealed with a formal peace deal, signed – significantly – in Saudi Arabia, on 16 September 2018.⁵⁹⁹

While the Arab nations and the Americans had played key roles, others had no doubt been supporting. Behind the scenes, the UN and the African Union were encouraging Ethiopia and Eritrea to resolve their differences. This culminated in the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, flying to Addis Ababa in September 2018 –

⁵⁹⁰ <https://africatimes.com/2018/04/23/yamamoto-heads-to-djibouti-after-rare-eritrea-visit/>
<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/05/03/can-ethiopia-and-eritrea-make-peace>

⁵⁹¹ <https://tesfanews.net/president-isaias-pay-state-visit-to-saudi-arabia/>

⁵⁹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/20/saudi-arabia-to-release-1000-ethiopian-prisoners>

⁵⁹³ <http://ethemb.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/May-25-2018.pdf>

⁵⁹⁴ <http://ethemb.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/May-25-2018.pdf>

⁵⁹⁵ <http://www.aigaforum.com/news2018/conversation-with-pm-abiy.htm>

⁵⁹⁶ <https://tesfanews.net/abu-dhabi-crown-prince-receives-eritrean-president/>

⁵⁹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/8/ethiopias-pm-abiy-ahmed-in-eritrea-for-landmark-visit>

⁵⁹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-44824676>

⁵⁹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritrea-saudi-idUSKCN1LW0KV>

just hours after the joint declaration.⁶⁰⁰ Guterres told reporters that in his view the sanctions against Eritrea could soon be lifted since they would soon likely become “obsolete.”⁶⁰¹ It was an impressive combined effort by the international community, who had acted in unison to try to resolve a regional issue that has festered for years. However, as the conflict in Tigray has escalated, with no end in sight, there are suggestions that the UAE is changing tack. The United States has gone out of its way to consult its various Arab allies, including the UAE and this appears to be bearing fruit. On 10 June 2021 Africa Confidential reported that: “...UAE, which has been supplying weapons, money and diplomatic support to Addis, seems to be changing tack, cutting its associations with Ethiopia's military after prodding from Washington.”⁶⁰²

Somalia

The dramatic ending of the years of bitterness between Eritrea and Ethiopia obscured the fact that there was a third party in this relationship: Somalia. In July 2018 – in the same month as Prime Minister Abiy visited Asmara to seal the peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia there was a three-day visit to Asmara by Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi ‘Farmajo’.⁶⁰³ President Farmajo’s trip to Eritrea was the first by a Somali leader for fifteen years. A spokesman for the Somali president, said on Twitter that the country “is ready to write a new chapter of its relations with Eritrea.” Economic and security concerns are at the top of the agenda, as well as “regional issues of interest to both countries,” Eritrea’s information ministry said. There were further bilateral visits in August 2018 and April 2019.⁶⁰⁴ This culminated in a summit between the leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia on 27 January 2020 held in Asmara.⁶⁰⁵ The formal statement spoke of the three leaders agreeing to: “bolster their joint efforts to foster effective regional cooperation” while co-operating on security questions.⁶⁰⁶

When the Tigray war began in November 2020 the immediate impact on Somalia was the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops who had been fighting al-Shabaab. As Bloomberg reported: “Ethiopia is redeploying about 3,000 troops to help with the Tigray offensive, the people said, asking not to be identified because they’re not authorized to speak to the media. The troops being withdrawn are Ethiopian National Defence Force soldiers and don’t fall under the command of the 5,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia, they said.”⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁰ <https://www.africanews.com/2018/07/09/un-chief-to-meet-ethiopia-s-pm-on-monday-after-peace-breakthrough-with-eritrea/>

⁶⁰¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-eritrea-un-sanctions/u-n-chief-says-sanctions-on-eritrea-likely-to-become-obsolete-idUSKBN1IZ1UG>

⁶⁰² *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 62, No. 12, ‘Muddled Meddling by the UAE’, 10 June 2021

https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/13432/Muddled_meddling_by_the_UAE

⁶⁰³ <https://www.dw.com/en/somali-president-begins-three-day-visit-in-eritrea-as-diplomatic-relations-thaw/a-44865801>

⁶⁰⁴ <https://eritreahub.org/timeline-how-the-president-isaias-prime-minister-abi-relationship-developed>

⁶⁰⁵ <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/01/27/somalia-ethiopia-and-eritrea-pledge-joint-anti-terror-war/>

⁶⁰⁶ <https://villasomalia.gov.so/en/heads-of-state-and-government-meeting-between-eritrea-ethiopia-and-somalia-joint-communicue/>

⁶⁰⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-13/ethiopia-withdraws-thousands-of-troops-from-neighboring-somalia>

This re-deployment caused immense problems for the Tigrayan members of the Ethiopian contingent in Somalia. Between 200 and 300 Ethiopian troops who were ethnic Tigrayans found themselves forced to hand in their weapons.⁶⁰⁸ Reuters was sent an explanation of this decision by the Ethiopian authorities. "The peacekeepers are not being disarmed due to ethnicity but due to infiltration of TPLF elements in various entities which is part of an ongoing investigation," said a text message to Reuters from the State of Emergency Taskforce, a body set up to deal with the Tigray conflict. No further information was given."⁶⁰⁹

By January 2021 reports were emerging that young Somalis had been sent to Eritrea to be trained to fight in Tigray.⁶¹⁰ Voice of America reported that the Somalis had been transported to Eritrea as early as November 2019 – a year before the war in Tigray broke out.⁶¹¹

"Maryam Ahmed is the mother of a Somali soldier sent to Eritrea over a year ago. She says mothers like her haven't heard from their boys since they left for training. Ahmed says their sons are missing since November 2019 and they have no contact from them since then. We don't eat, drink or sleep due to their unknown situation, she says. We urgently need their information, says Ahmed and are calling on the president, the prime minister and all government officials to tell us where our sons are and whether they are dead or alive. The parents' concerns were raised after former deputy of Somalia's National Intelligence and Security Agency Abdisalan Yusuf Guled this month claimed more than 370 Somali troops had died fighting in Tigray."

The parents of the troops protested in Mogadishu, calling on President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo's government to provide information on their whereabouts. The Daily Telegraph reported that the Somalis had officially been recruited by Somalia's government to work in Qatar, only to later find out they had been sent to Eritrea and forced to serve as soldiers.⁶¹² Families of soldiers who were killed in these operations were offered up to \$10,000 in compensation.⁶¹³ They had been told they were going to work in Qatar – only to find the destination was Eritrea. The Qatari government reacted angrily.⁶¹⁴ The Gulf state "condemns any abusive and duplicitous recruitment of any individual who was falsely told they were moving to Qatar for employment opportunities. The State of Qatar stands against such practices and urges all governments to investigate such abuses."

⁶⁰⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-somalia-exclusive/exclusive-tigrayan-peacekeepers-in-somalia-disarmed-by-ethiopian-colleagues-sources-say-idUSKBN27Y1HC>

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/somalia-mothers-fear-sons-ethiopia-conflict-75421149>

⁶¹¹ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somali-lawmakers-demand-inquiry-alleged-troops-fighting-tigray>

⁶¹² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/29/somali-men-forced-eritrean-army-impression-signing-security/#:~:text=Contact%20us-Somali%20men%20forced%20into%20Eritrean%20army%20under%20impression%20they%20were,for%20security%20jobs%20in%20Qatar&text=Anger%20is%20mounting%20in%20Somalia,fight%20in%20Ethiopia's%20civil%20war.>

⁶¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-eritrea-security/anger-in-somalia-as-sons-secretly-sent-to-serve-in-eritrea-military-force-idUSKBN29X1F5>

⁶¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-eritrea-security/anger-in-somalia-as-sons-secretly-sent-to-serve-in-eritrea-military-force-idUSKBN29X1F5>

Since this story broke there has been relatively little news of the Somali involvement in the war in Tigray. But the New York Times published a story in April 2021 which confirmed the continuing involvement in the conflict.⁶¹⁵ “Critics say Mr. Mohamed appears to be taking his cues from Eritrea’s autocratic president, Isaias Afwerki, who has become a close ally in recent months. The two leaders regularly speak on the phone, according to several Western officials and a former senior Somali government official, and Mr. Afwerki’s military recently trained a contingent of about 3,000 Somali soldiers who were expected to return home recently.” It is stories like this that underline President Isaias’s continuing ability to influence events across the Horn to his advantage.

Sudan, Egypt and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The Tigray conflict can be seen in a wider context. The Somalis were by no means the only nation drawn into the war; the Sudanese were immediately affected. As we have seen, the first major offensive by Ethiopian and Eritrean was into western Tigray – to capture the town of Humera and cut the Tigrayan forces from access to Sudan. To supplement the troops at his disposal, Prime Minister Abiy withdrew forces that had been occupying territory that was contested between Sudan and Ethiopia. Sudanese media reported this – and the Sudanese reaction. “The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) have reportedly taken control of the area of Khor Yabis in eastern El Gedaref on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia...the army recovered Khor Yabis in El Fashaga El Sughra, off Barakat Norein, after 25 years of absence.”⁶¹⁶

The Fashaga triangle has a long and tangled history, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century and treaties in which Britain, Italy and Ethiopia all had a hand.⁶¹⁷ Suffice it to say, the area was claimed by both Sudan and Ethiopia, but that for many years large areas of this fertile and well-watered triangle had been inhabited by Ethiopian farmers. Many were Amhara and they had been guarded by Ethiopian forces, which had been withdrawn to fight in Tigray. As they left the Sudanese seized their chance and established control of the land, a development which was greeted with fury by the Amhara farmers. There was an attempt by Amhara militia to re-capture the area on 12 December, leading to clashes with the Sudanese, who had reinforced their positions.⁶¹⁸ Local Sudanese farmers swore that they would never give up the territory.

Since then, there has been a tense stand-off, with occasional clashes between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces. In March 2021, the Bloomberg news agency, quoted UN sources as saying that the Ethiopians had been reinforced by Eritrean troops who had crossed into the Fashaga area.⁶¹⁹ “The conflict along the border between Sudan and Ethiopia remains active, with Sudanese Armed Forces and Ethiopian –

⁶¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/world/africa/somalia-president.html>

⁶¹⁶ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-army-regains-control-of-border-region-after-25-years>

⁶¹⁷ <https://eritreahub.org/the-long-history-behind-the-current-sudanese-ethiopian-border-clash>

⁶¹⁸ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/sudan-sends-more-troops-to-border-area-after-ambush-blamed-on-ethiopia-1.1130838>

⁶¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-24/eritrea-forces-deployed-in-disputed-sudan-ethiopia-area-un-says>

including Amhara militias — and Eritrean forces deployed around Barkhat settlement in Greater Fashaga and clashes reported since early March,” the UN said ...in its latest situation report on Ethiopia.’

This was by no means the only issue that divided the nations. As soon as the war broke out Tigrayans began flooding across the Sudanese border, with Khartoum playing the role of host to the refugees, as it has done down the years. Camps were established by the UNHCR and its associated partners. By April 2021 these were home to over 63,000 men, women and children, most of whom were Tigrayans, but with some Eritreans and other ethnicities.⁶²⁰ The number would probably have been considerably higher, had the Ethiopians not deployed troops along the border to try to prevent the refugee flight. As the Sudanese media reported in January 2021.⁶²¹ “The Ethiopian army began closing the borders with Sudan, deploying troops, patrolling the border and building a fence to prevent refugees from reaching Hamdayet camp,” an eyewitness told the Sudan Tribune.

A third, and potentially most difficult question, bedevils relations between Sudan and Ethiopia. It is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, situated inside Ethiopia, just 45 kilometres from the Sudanese border.⁶²² This is not the place to rehearse the long and complex dispute over the project, which divides Ethiopia from its neighbours downstream. Sudan worries that a flood of water could wash away farms if the water is released too rapidly while Egypt (which relies almost exclusively on the Nile for its water) is afraid that its people will be left without this vital resource. For these reasons Egypt and Sudan would like a binding treaty to govern the dam and its waters. Ethiopia, on the other hand, argues that the dam is only to produce hydroelectricity and will therefore not deprive Cairo’s residents of their water. Moreover, Addis argues, the rains feeding the Blue Nile fall on its mountains and it can therefore use the water as it wishes. As a result, Ethiopia rejects binding treaties or international monitoring, preferring to try to have the African Union mediate between the three nations. This issue has bedevilled relations between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt for years and shows no sign of resolution. Indeed, President al-Sisi has signed military co-operation treaties with Sudan and warned that Egypt would not accept any diminution of its Nile water. ““I say once again no one can take a drop from Egypt’s water, and if it happens there will be inconceivable instability in the region.”⁶²³

The Arab nations clearly have an interest in the Horn and a stake in its future. Through their wealth the Gulf states and the Saudis also have considerable influence. But it is a complex relationship. The Eritreans are rarely open to persuasion – although they are not immune from it. Ethiopia is so deep in crisis it would appear that Prime Minister Abiy’s primary objective is survival and he has little time to concentrate on external concerns. Egypt and Sudan have their own agendas which do not necessarily coincide with those of their Arab brothers and

⁶²⁰ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/144?sv=0&geo=160>

⁶²¹ <https://eritreahub.org/ethiopia-deploys-more-troops-to-prevent-refugees-from-crossing-into-sudan>

⁶²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Ethiopian_Renaissance_Dam

⁶²³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/30/egypts-sisi-warns-ethiopia-dam-risks-unimaginable-instability>

sisters. Overall, the situation is as complex and hard to read as any other aspect of the current conflict.

5.6 Conclusion

By the end of June, the collective pressure exercised by the international community through diplomatic pressure appeared to have made little impact on the situation in Tigray. The war was continuing, humanitarian access was still limited with large areas remaining inaccessible and the UN officially declaring a famine.⁶²⁴ Journalists and international observers were regularly refused permission to travel through the region. The G7 meeting by the British seaside in Cornwall adopted a statement which was no more than previous resolutions adopted by the EU, US or UK.⁶²⁵ The British government – when challenged in the House of Commons – did little more than play for time, with the Minister, James Duddridge, hoping that once the 21 June Ethiopian election was out of the way a “pivot point” would have been reached, enabling Prime Minister Abiy to take more radical steps.⁶²⁶ He may be correct, but at present there is little to indicate that he will be proved right.

The most important steps required to ending the war include the withdrawal of Eritrean troops, the opening of talks between the Tigrayan authorities and the Ethiopian government and – flowing from such talks – a mutually acceptable ceasefire, leading to a long-term solution. All sides know this, and know that if this was done, and a vast humanitarian push was allowed to get under way, tens, if not hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved. Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias appear currently to be joined at the hip: their mutual fates resting on inflicting a decisive defeat on the Tigrayans; an outcome that presently appears unlikely to be achieved. The future of both governments, and the Horn of Africa as a whole, looks uncertain unless a lasting peace settlement can be agreed by all parties.

7. The Humanitarian Situation: Aid, Food Security and Famine

By Felicity Mulford⁶²⁷

7.1 Food Security in Tigray

To fully understand the devastating impact the ongoing conflict could have on food security in Tigray, it is essential to recognise the regions history of food insecurity, conflict and development. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the environmental and human factors which have led to food insecurity in the past, before setting the unnerving scene unfolding in Tigray today. Not only is starvation

⁶²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57432280>

⁶²⁵ <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-situation-in-tigray-ethiopia#:~:text=G7%20Foreign%20Ministers'%20Statement%20on%20the%20Situation%20in%20Tigray%2C%20Ethiopia,-Media%20Note&text=We%20condemn%20the%20killing%20of,of%20Tigray%20and%20Eritrean%20refugees.>

⁶²⁶ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-06-14/debates/FFC5AFA0-DFA9-467C-8434-1EC96B35AD9E/Ethiopia>

⁶²⁷ Hillary Rodham Clinton scholar, Swansea University

currently being used as a weapon of war, but lifesaving food aid is being obstructed from reaching those in need. Despite decades of improvement in food security across Tigray, a famine far exceeding the devastation of the 1984-85 famine could indeed occur in the coming months. The chapter will end by painting a solemn picture of what we can expect in the region, if unfettered access is not granted to humanitarian workers, if relief is not delivered or capacities of Tigrayans enhanced.

A historically food insecure region

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” the World Food Summit⁶²⁸

When one thinks of Ethiopia, it is hard not to picture the devastating images which emerged during the famines of 1973-74 or 1984-85. The harrowed faces of thousands of people, skin and bone, waiting in line for aid distributions. The distressing realisation that they were the lucky ones. The events which unfolded in 1973-74, were by no means new. In fact, famines and droughts have been reported in Ethiopia as far back as 250 BC.⁶²⁹ Written over a thousand years ago, a letter in the ‘Book of Saints of the Ethiopian Church’ from the Christian Emperor of Ethiopia conveyed suffering in Ethiopia: *“Great tribulation hath come upon our lands and all our men are dying of the plague, and our beasts and cattle have perished and God hath restrained the heavens so that they cannot rain upon our land...”*⁶³⁰

Although historical records are incomplete, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that monstrous famines have devastated Ethiopia more than 40 times in the past 500 years.⁶³¹ Some centuries, such as the 13th and 20th appear historically significant, with more than 4 calamitous famines on record.⁶³² In the 20th century alone, the region of Tigray dealt with devastating famines in 1958-59, 1965-67 and in 1973 -74, the last of which many scholars argue never ended and merely moulded into the 1984-85 famine.⁶³³ The total death toll for the famine events during the 20th century is speculated to have reached around 1.8 million people, however the real figure will never be known.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁸ World Food Summit, 1996 – Cited In: FAO (2006) Food Security, Policy Brief, Available at:

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faoitaly/documents/pdf/pdf_food_security_concept_note.pdf

⁶²⁹ Webb, P., And J. Von Braun. 1994. Famine And Food Security In Ethiopia: Lessons For Africa. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, New York, USA.; Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. Ecology And Society 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁶³⁰ Graham Hancock (1985) Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.; Also Found In “The Book Of The Saints Of The Ethiopian Church” Available At: https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/the_book_of_the_saints_of_the_ethiopian.html?id=ooaxcnjqqlc&redir_esc=y.

⁶³¹ 4 Famines In The 13th Century, No Less Than 23 Major Famines 1540-1800, 6 During 1900s - Speculates More As Historical Records Are Spotty, In Graham Hancock (1985) Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd

⁶³² Graham Hancock (1985) Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd

⁶³³ Mesfin Wolde (1986) Marian Rural Vulnerability To Famine In Ethiopia 1958-1977. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

⁶³⁴ Figures Vary Greatly Between Sources. 1 Million Died In 1984 Famine, 200,000 Died In 1973, Death Toll Unknown For 1965-67, ‘Tens Of Thousands’ And 400,000 Died In 1958 According To: Mesfin Wolde (1986) Marian Rural Vulnerability To Famine In Ethiopia 1958-1977. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.; Alternatively, Alex De Waal Outlines Death Tolls At 600,000 For 1984-5, Concurs 200,000 In 1973, 50,000 In 1966, 100,000 In 1958, In His Book: De Waal (2018) Mass Starvation, (Polity Press, Cambridge).

A combination of interrelated factors has contributed to the region of Tigray's vulnerability to chronic hunger and food insecurity. These include recurrent drought and environmental degradation due to population pressures, poor policy planning and implementation, and perhaps most significantly, intermittent conflicts.

7.2 Environmental drivers of hunger

The Tigrayan region of Northern Ethiopia is situated in the highlands amongst rugged terrain. Set within the Tekeze Basin, the region is characterised by steep escarpments juxtaposed against flatlands. Miles of cropland are interrupted by the occasional bush, shrub or patch of grassland, while forests are few and far between.⁶³⁵ Three quarters of all Tigrayans live in rural communities, often living from harvest to harvest, relying on subsistence farming to provide their main source of food.⁶³⁶ This has meant that, historically, harvest failures could be enough to plunge rural families into famine throughout the highlands of Tigray. The stony soils contribute to the constantly low crop yields⁶³⁷ and many households rely on the freedom of movement for seasonal work to ensure that they can pay for additional food when it's needed.

Droughts and Rainfall

Tigray faces repeated droughts.⁶³⁸ Although droughts have been recorded throughout Ethiopian history, analysts have indicated that these instances are becoming more pronounced as a result of climate change.⁶³⁹ Every two to five years, moderate to severe droughts have affected Tigray, limiting water availability and increasing the vulnerability of livestock to diseases, including Pasteurellosis.⁶⁴⁰ The droughts can be explained by a combination of climatic and human factors.⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁵Nyseen, Jacob And Frankl (2019) *Geo-Trekking In Ethiopia's Tropical Mountains*, Springer, Cham, Pages 373-386.; Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again. The Conversation, Available At <https://theconversation.com/ethiopia-tigray-region-has-seen-famine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>.

⁶³⁶ UNICEF, Situation Analysis Of Children And Women: Tigray Region, Available At: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/2351/file/tigray%20region%20.pdf>.

⁶³⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) *Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine*, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁶³⁸ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. *Ecology And Society* 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁶³⁹ Hadgu G, Tesfaye K, Mamo G (2015) Analysis Of Climate Change In Northern Ethiopia: Implications For Agricultural Production. *Theor Appl Climatol* 121:733-747.; Araya AB (2011) *Coping With Drought For Food Security In Tigray, Ethiopia*. Ph.D. Thesis, Wageningen; Berhane, A., Hadgu, G., Worku, W. Et Al. Trends In Extreme Temperature And Rainfall Indices In The Semi-Arid Areas Of Western Tigray, Ethiopia. *Environ Syst Res* 9, 3 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40068-020-00165-6>.

⁶⁴⁰ ACAPS (2021) *Ethiopia: The Pre-Crisis Situation In Tigray*, Available At: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20210223_acaps_secondary_data_review_ethiopia_pre-crisis_situation_in_tigray.pdf.

⁶⁴¹ Sharon Nicholson 'Climate Drought, And Famine In Africa' In Art Hansen And Della E Mcmillan, *Food In Sub-Saharan African*, Boulder, Colo, Lynne Rienner Publishers 1986, Pp 107-28; JG Charney, 'Dynamics If Deserts And Drought In The Sahel' *Quarterly Journal Of The Royal Meteorological Society*, Vol 101, 1975, Pp193-202; J Otterman 1974 'Baring High-Albedo Soils And Overgrazing' *Science*, Vol 186, Pp531-33 1974; Glantz, *Desertification, Environmental Degradation In And Around Arid Lands*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1977.

Increasingly, extreme temperatures and irregular rainfall are seen across the Horn of Africa.⁶⁴² Since 1950, research has shown that temperatures have risen by 0.37 degrees Celsius every ten years.⁶⁴³ Studies of rainfall indicate substantial decreases in rain over the same period. Rainfall varies between 400 to 1800 mm per year, with higher levels of rainfall near the cliffs and escarpments. The Southern region of low-lying Western Tigray receives the most rainfall, creating a more fertile and prosperous environment for agricultural production.⁶⁴⁴ With wet days becoming fewer and further between, and days and nights warming⁶⁴⁵ the crop growing periods are reducing, as is crop yield.⁶⁴⁶ A lack of rainfall hits the many subsistence farmers the hardest. Without irrigation systems which feed off the limited groundwater supply or harnessing the naturally flowing rivers and lakes, the crops struggle to grow. The near total reliance on rainfall for food production leaves families very vulnerable to even the slightest changes in the climate. Water shortages for personal consumption and for food production limit the livelihoods of people in rural areas. As a result, climate variability can have significant implications on food security, nutrition, and health.⁶⁴⁷

Growing seasons vary within the region, with areas in the North Western and Western Tigray having slightly longer growing periods. North East Tigray, near the Rift Valley escarpment suffers from the shortest growing periods and the least variation in rainfall. This makes North East Tigray more predisposed to crop failure than the rest of region.⁶⁴⁸ Growing periods in the majority of Tigray span from June to September, in line with the Kiremt rainfall. In preparation for the Kiremt rain during 2021, from May onwards farmers will plough their fields. This might not be possible due to the ongoing conflict in the region, providing great cause for concern for food insecurity amongst subsistence farmers. For areas where risk of crop failure

⁶⁴² Gebrechorkos SH, Hulsmann S, Bemofer C (2018) Changes In Temperature And Precipitation Extremes In Ethiopia, Kenya And Tanzania. *Int J Climatol* 39:18-30

⁶⁴³ NMA (2007) Climate Change National Adaptation Program Of Action (NAPA) Of Ethiopia. NMA, Addis Ababa

⁶⁴⁴ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁶⁴⁵ Asfaw A, Simane B, Hassen A, Bantider A (2018) Variability And Time Series Trend Analysis Of Rainfall And Temperature In North Central Ethiopia: A Case Study In Woleka Sub-Basin. *Weather Clim Extrem* 19:29-41.; Mekasha A, Tesfaye K, Duncan AJ (2014) Trends In Daily Observed Temperature And Precipitation Extremes Over Three Ethiopian Eco-Environments. *Int J Climatol* 34:1990-1999

⁶⁴⁶ Hatfield JL, Prueger JH (2015) Temperature Extremes: Effect On Plant Growth And Development. *Weather Clim Extrem* 10:4-10.; Thornton PK, Ericksen PJ, Herrero M, Challinor AJ (2014) Climate Variability And Vulnerability To Climate: A Review. *Glob Change Biol* 20:3313-3328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bcb.12581>

⁶⁴⁷ Schmidhuber J, Tubiello FN. Global Food Security Under Climate Change. *Proc Natl Acad Sci*. 2007;4(50):19703-8.; Weldearegay And Gebremichael Tedla (2018) Impact Of Climate Variability On Household Food Availability In Tigray: <https://agricultureandfoodsecurity.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40066-017-0154-0>

⁶⁴⁸ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.; De Pauw, E., Gobel, W. & Adam, H. Agrometeorological Aspects Of Agriculture And Forestry In The Arid Zones. *Agricultural And Forest Meteorology* 103, 43-58 (2000).; De Pauw, E., Nachtergaele, F., Antoine, J., Fisher, G. & Velthuizen, H. A Provisional World Climatic Resource Inventory Based On The Length-Of-Growing- Period Concept. *National Soil Reference Collections And Databases (NASREC)*, 30-43 (1996).; De Pauw, E. & Ramasamy, S. *Country Case Studies Of Changes In The Land Resource Base For Agriculture Under Climate Change: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe. Technical Report For FAO Project "Development Of Medium-Term Warning System For Africa"*. (2017).; Tewodros Gebreegziabher Et Al. Contour Furrows For In Situ Soil And Water Conservation, Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. *Soil And Tillage Research* 103, 257- 264, Doi:10.1016/J.Still.2008.05.021 (2009).

is already high and chronic hunger is rife, the ongoing conflict will likely have huge consequences if agriculture is disrupted.

The 'belg' rainfall period lasts from February to May and is important for farmers in the South Eastern Woredas of Tigray. In March 2021, this rainfall had reduced by 25-50% compared to the normal average according to remote sensing imagery. Insufficient rainfall has already impacted 26,000 hectares of arable land and over 70,000 households.⁶⁴⁹ The challenge of producing enough food for survival is already immense. The impact of limited rainfall and ongoing conflict compound the existing challenge of producing enough food for survival in difficult terrain.⁶⁵⁰

Population Pressures and environmental degradation

Drought is caused not only by the increase in temperature and decrease in rainfall, but also by environmental degradation and desertification – a result of human activities, such as overgrazing, overcultivation, deforestation and poor developmental policies.⁶⁵¹ The social pressures caused by an increasing population has contributed to the environmental degradation and desertification of the already harsh landscape.

The majority of Tigrayans live in the highlands, where the climate is moister, risk of disease is lower and volcanic deposits have led to strips of fertile soils. People are congregated in towns, or rural areas where rainfall is higher.⁶⁵² Despite the tough growing conditions, subsistence agriculture is the main land use in Tigray. Crops vary across the region, depending on altitude and soil type.⁶⁵³ In the highlands wheat, barley and pulses are grown, while the lowlands maize, sorghum and sesame are produced.⁶⁵⁴ Farmers rely on livestock for a number of essential roles: to plough and prepare fields, to transport grains for sowing and produce to market, for natural fertilisers and for food security should times get hard.⁶⁵⁵

The inhabitants of Tigray rely on mixed farming methods across fragmented and overused land.⁶⁵⁶ The population pressures mean land is not left fallow. By

⁶⁴⁹ OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁶⁵⁰ Sharon Nicholson, 'Sub-Saharan Rainfall 1981-1984' Journal Of Climate And Applied Meteorology, Vol 24 1985, Pp1388-91.

⁶⁵¹ Alemneh Dejene (1990) Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁵² Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_Of_The_Humanitarian_Situation;

⁶⁵³ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_Of_The_Humanitarian_Situation;

⁶⁵⁴ Alemtsehay Tsegay, Berhanu Abreha & Getachew Hruy. In Geo-Trekking In Ethiopia's Tropical Mountains 403-413 (Springer, 2019).

⁶⁵⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_Of_The_Humanitarian_Situation;

⁶⁵⁶ Degefa T. Household Seasonal Food Insecurity: Causes. Social Science Research Report Series No. 26. Addis Ababa: Organization For Science Research In Eastern And Southern Africa; 2002.; Weldearegay And Gebremichael Tedla (2018) Impact Of Climate Variability On Household Food Availability In Tigray, Available at: <https://agricultureandfoodsecurity.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40066-017-0154-0>.

repeatedly cultivating the land, the farmers remove the essential nutrients from the soil and ultimately turn soil into dust,⁶⁵⁷ a process known as desertification. Although environmental stewardship in the long term would be better for food production in the region, the UN Environment Programme noted that the lack of immediate benefits to the people living on the land has often prevented long-term planning in the region. Poverty is a major contributor to environmental degradation.⁶⁵⁸ A number of studies have highlighted the “*self-perpetuating cycle of increased human demand on the ecosystem and vulnerability to famine.*”⁶⁵⁹ Desertification reduces the ability of the soils to sustain life, resulting in low productivity and food production.⁶⁶⁰

Additional research indicates that the absence of vegetative cover causes a higher level of reflection of the sun’s radiation, leading to drier soils and the formation of fewer clouds.⁶⁶¹ Through overgrazing and desertification, farmers are contributing to the persistent cycle of droughts in the region. The combination of a loss of vegetative cover, the compaction of the land from the movement of livestock and dry weather can contribute to an overall reduction in soil fertility and an erosion of the little fertile topsoil. With topsoil eroded, land becoming sandier and fewer rains, the ability of Tigrayans to grow crops will diminish.⁶⁶² Some scholars have even argued that topsoil erosion was a major contributing factor to the 1984 famine.⁶⁶³ In 1990, it was estimated that 1,900 million tons of soil was being eroded annually due to human activities, with 76% of the highlands significantly eroded, and 4% unable to support food production. In the 1990s projections estimated that by 2010 18% of the highlands would be bare rock and un-farmable.⁶⁶⁴ Considerable effort has been made since the 1990s to look after the environment through government-led initiatives. By 2020, the rate of soil erosion was a loss of 2.2 tons per hectare of land per year.⁶⁶⁵

In 1950 Ethiopia’s forests covered 44% of the total land. Wood is required for fires and cooking and as the population has increased, deforestation has reduced

⁶⁵⁷ Graham Hancock (1985) *Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger*, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁵⁸ World Commission On Environment And Development (1983) *Our Common Future*, Oxford, Oxford Uni Press, P.3, available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

⁶⁵⁹ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).; Lloyd Timberlake (1985) *Africa In Crisis, The Causes, The Cures Of Environmental Crisis*, Washington DC; Brown And Wolf (1985) *Reversing Africa’s Decline*, World Watch Paper 65 Washington DC; Biswas, (1986) *Land Use In Africa*, Vol 3 (4); Glantz (1987) *Droughts And Hunger In Africa: Denying Famine A Future*, Cambridge Uni Press.

⁶⁶⁰ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁶¹ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).; Kenneth Hare ‘Climate Variations, Drought And Desertification’ No.653, Geneva Switzerland, World Meteorological Organisations (WMO) 1985; JG Charney, ‘Dynamics If Deserts And Drought In The Sahel’ *Quarterly Journal Of The Royal Meteorological Society*, Vol 101, 1975, Pp193-202

⁶⁶² Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁶³ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁶⁴ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).; M Constable And Members Of The Ethiopian Highland Reclamation Study, *The Degradation Of Resources And An Evaluation Of Actions To Combat It*, Working Paper 19, Ministry Of Agriculture, Addis Ababa, December 1984, Pp.23-48.

⁶⁶⁵ Woldermaria And Edo Harka (2020) *Effect Of Land Use And Land Cover Change On Soil Erosion In Erer Sub-Basin, Northeast Wabi Shebelle Basin, Ethiopia*. MDPI.

Ethiopia's forest covering to just 4% of the total land by the 1980's.⁶⁶⁶ Some commentators have described the highlands as 'bald'.⁶⁶⁷ Today forests are rare and located in isolated, often protected areas.⁶⁶⁸ Natural woodlands still exist along the Rift Valley's eastern escarpment, in an area that is not suitable for farming.⁶⁶⁹ However not all of the rugged cliffs have scared off farmers. Lack of farmable land has led people to farm unprotected areas. This too has had a negative impact on the ecosystem, as the thin topsoil is then exposed to the wind and rain, and blown or washed away during the infrequent rains.⁶⁷⁰

To combat these problems, over the past few decades woodland regeneration projects along with an array of conservation measures have helped to boost the amount of small shrub and tree species, and protect the vital ecosystem from further harm.⁶⁷¹ Although soil and water conservation measures have improved the level of environmental stewardship in the region, much of the environment is still being stretched beyond its agronomic limits.⁶⁷² Since the 1990s agricultural policies have focussed on building the resilience of the soils and water supplies to make the region more productive. Since then, vegetative cover, groundwater availability and agricultural outputs have improved. Along with the rise in environmental protections, irrigation systems have been implemented in areas, including the Sesame growing regions of Western Tigray, boosting productivity and local engagement in water conservation.⁶⁷³

Desert Locusts

Cereals form part of the staple diet in Tigray and unsurprisingly represent the most common crop. Unfortunately, desert locusts are a recurrent problem in the region.⁶⁷⁴ The desert locust invasion at the end of 2020 was the worst in 70 years, destroying crops across 120,300 hectares of land in South, South East, Eastern and Central Tigray.⁶⁷⁵ According to the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture, 25% of the harvest in these

⁶⁶⁶ Graham Hancock, 1985, Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁶⁷ Graham Hancock, 1985, Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁶⁸ Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again. The Conversation, 17/11/2020. <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seen-famine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>

⁶⁶⁹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation;

⁶⁷⁰ Graham Hancock, 1985, Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁷¹ Jacob, M., Lanckriet, S. & Descheemaeker, K. In Geo-Trekking In Ethiopia's Tropical Mountains 251-259 (Springer, 2019).

⁶⁷² Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation;

⁶⁷³ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation;

⁶⁷⁴ Tsegay A., Abriha B., Hruy G. (2019) Major Crops And Cropping Systems In Dogu'a Tembien. In: Nyssen J., Jacob M., Frankl A. (Eds) Geo-Trekking In Ethiopia's Tropical Mountains. Geoguide. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04955-3_27; Cyril Piou (2020). Locust Invasions Are Cyclical: African States Shouldn't Be Caught Napping, Available At: <https://theconversation.com/locust-invasions-are-cyclical-african-states-shouldnt-be-caught-napping-130883>

⁶⁷⁵ Mercy Corps (2020) Desert Locusts In East Africa, Available At: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/desert-locusts-east-africa-plague-another-order>; FAO (2020) Desert Locust Bulletin, Available At: <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/common/ecg/562/en/dl505e.pdf>; OCHA (2021) Ethiopia Situation Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1t6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

regions was destroyed by locusts. Many farmers harvested their crops early to avoid losing too much to the plague. This meant that the cereals harvested would not have been fully grown, instantly reducing the farm's output. To make matters worse, reports indicate that the locusts got into many grain stores across the region, ravaging what was harvested as well as the seed which would have been used for the following harvest. This increased Tigray's vulnerability to food insecurity before the conflict began.

The combination of human activities coupled with the changing climate is contributing to the vicious cycle of poverty and food insecurity in Tigray. Traditional agricultural practises, land degradation and poverty mean that food insecurity in Tigray is pervasive,⁶⁷⁶ and many families rely on safety net programmes to support their dietary needs.⁶⁷⁷ When these vulnerabilities compound with biblical plagues of desert locusts and ongoing conflict, it is unsurprising that food insecurity is prevalent.

7.3 Policy Driven Hunger 1970-1991

There is no doubt that the climate in Tigray has contributed to food insecurity in the region. However, this alone did not cause the famines of 1973-74 and 1984-85, or the food insecurity seen today. The climate and population pressures have been intensified by a series of poor policies, implemented by successive regimes in Ethiopia between 1971 and 1999.

Chronic hunger under Emperor Haile Selassie's regime (1971-1974)

Across history books, Emperor Haile Selassie reputation is debated. He bears the reputation of a great leader, an international figure, a god-like character and a moderniser. In the 1930's and under his rule the Italian colonial armies were successfully fought off, freeing Ethiopia from the threat of colonialism. Infrastructure across Ethiopia improved greatly, in the form of new roads, airports, and a national airline. His legacy has remained vibrant across Africa as the lead advocate for the formation of the OAU, and his contribution to African history was reaffirmed when his statue was unveiled in Addis Ababa outside the African Union's headquarters in 2019.⁶⁷⁸ To those who follow the Rastafarian religion, he was God incarnate and tributes to him can be heard in Bob Marley's music.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁶ Holden, Stein. (2004). Land Degradation, Drought And Food Security In A Less-Favoured Area In The Ethiopian Highlands: A Bio-Economic Model With Market Imperfections. *Agricultural Economics*. 30. 31-49. 10.1016/J.Agecon.2002.09.001.; Holden, Stein & Shiferaw, Bekele & Pender, John. (2004). Non-Farm Income, Household Welfare, And Sustainable Land Management In A Less-Favoured Area In The Ethiopian Highlands. *Food Policy*. 29. 369-392. 10.1016/J.Foodpol.2004.07.007.; Pender, John & Gebremedhin, Berhanu. (2008). Determinants Of Agricultural And Land Management Practices And Impacts On Crop Production And Household Income In The Highlands Of Tigray, Ethiopia. *Journal Of African Economies*. 17. 395-450. 10.1093/Jae/Ejm028.; Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. *Ecology And Society* 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>

⁶⁷⁷ Woreda Bureau Of Agriculture. Unpublished Report; 2012.; In: Weldearegay And Gebremichael Tedla (2018) Impact Of Climate Variability On Household Food Availability In Tigray, Available at: <https://agricultureandfoodsecurity.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40066-017-0154->

⁶⁷⁸ BBC (2019) Haile Selassie: Why the African Union put up a statue, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-47172020>

⁶⁷⁹ Woldemariam (2019) The romantic rewriting of Haile Selassie's legacy must stop, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/02/04/the-romantic-rewriting-of-haile-selassies-legacy-must-stop/>

However, during his reign little attention was paid to the issue of chronic hunger, which was rife throughout Ethiopia.⁶⁸⁰ For the average Ethiopian, Haile Selassie's regime was no more than a leech sucking the life from their communities. Through crippling taxes, pillaging by the army and the squashing of any rebellions, lives were restricted, and ethnic divisions were engrained.⁶⁸¹ Consecutive famines occurred in Ethiopia under this regime. When warnings reached Addis Ababa about famine like conditions in Wollo in 1970, for fear of political embarrassment, Haile Selassie didn't acknowledge the situation and very little was done by the Ethiopian regime. By the time the story broke in the news, the situation in Wollo was devastating. The relief which reached Wollo was too little, too late for many. Hundreds of thousands died of hunger while Haile Selassie fed red meat to his caged lions. Limited political will to deal with the causes and consequences of chronic hunger in Ethiopia, and the draconian bureaucratic processes in place meant that aid was severely delayed and many lives lost.⁶⁸²

"[B]ad government, every bit as much as bad weather has been a crucial factor in the historical susceptibility... to drought and famine" Graham Hancock⁶⁸³

The famine in Wollo was arguably the breaking point for many Ethiopians. It represented the breakdown of the illusion of a god-like ruler, who ultimately allowed his people to starve just to protect his own political reputation.⁶⁸⁴ This period exemplifies how political decisions can have terrible consequences for human life and dignity. The revolution which led to the overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime in 1974 was fuelled by a loss of faith in the existing power structures and a quest for social justice in Ethiopia. For too long Ethiopians had lived in servitude to an imperial regime which served the interests of a small group of aristocrats.

Chronic hunger under Mengistu's Marxist regime (1977-1991)

Following the revolution in 1974, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party's (EPRP) promised to end famine and improve the welfare of everyday Ethiopians. Ending famines and chronic hunger in Ethiopia became a political symbol for the revolution, stirring great support across Ethiopia.⁶⁸⁵ The regime known as the Derg, was led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who took inspiration from Lenin's Marxist ideologies and fostered geopolitical ties with Russia.

In the beginning, there was evidence of real progress. The Derg set up the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the first state level mechanism which focussed on the prevention of widespread hunger. Through fact finding missions, this group assessed the needs of the people and the causes of the previous famines, with a view

⁶⁸⁰ Graham Hancock, 1985, *Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger*, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁸¹ Alex De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation* (Polity Press, Cambridge).

⁶⁸² Graham Hancock, 1985, *Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger*, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁸³ Graham Hancock, 1985, *Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger*, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁸⁴ Graham Hancock, 1985, *Ethiopia, The Challenge Of Hunger*, London Victor Gollancz Ltd.

⁶⁸⁵ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

to improve the lives of everyday Ethiopians. The RRC was crucial in instigating a number of structural reforms which sought to improve food security, including the abolishment of the system of feudal land tenure in March 1975.⁶⁸⁶ However, the RRC has been criticised for not including famine-vulnerable people in their political processes. For example, the EPRP's representatives in Tigray imposed these new land reforms by measuring and dividing the land in Tigray, with no public consultation.⁶⁸⁷ People were moved from land they had always farmed with almost no warning. The people of Tigray were suspicious of the new leadership.

Despite attempts to understand and improve food security, ten years later in 1984, Wollo and Tigray were yet again hit with famine. The world awakened to the horrors of famine, with news coverage and reports reaching all corners of the increasingly interconnected world. Even this regime, which had symbolised the fight against famine in their rise to power, could not fend off famine in the region. In fact, many scholars argue that poorly planned and implemented development strategies directly contributed to recurring food insecurity and underdevelopment in the region.⁶⁸⁸ Some scholars have even found trends between areas worse hit by the famines of 1977-1988 and specific government initiatives.⁶⁸⁹

Scholars identify a number of policies carried out by the Derg which may have contributed to famine-like conditions in Tigray and Wollo. This includes the Government resettlement programmes, the 'Surplus producing Woredas' scheme, also known as the 'Producer Cooperatives', the Villagisation initiative, and perhaps the least spoken about, their counter-insurgency campaigns. Although the RRC had played an important role in famine relief work in the 1970s, during the 1980s the Derg began to use the RRC to control and implement these new policies. Some commentators have indicated a belief that it was their intention to reduce food security in the Tigray region and neighbouring Eritrea (which was then part of Ethiopia) to starve their political opponents.⁶⁹⁰ Extremely high taxes including, rather ironically, the 'Famine Relief Tax' placed additional burdens on those already struggling to meet their basic needs.⁶⁹¹

Government Resettlement

⁶⁸⁶ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁶⁸⁷ Young (1994) *Peasants and Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray 1975-1989*, PhD thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC. 323-97

⁶⁸⁸ Paarlberg, R. L. 2002. *Governance And Food Security In An Age Of Globalization; 2020 Vision For Food, Agriculture, And The Environment*, Discussion Paper 36. International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, D.C., USA.; Bird, K., D. Booth, And N. Pratt. 2003. *Food Security Crisis In Southern Africa: The Political Background To Policy Failure*. International Development Department, Birmingham University, Birmingham, UK.; Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. *Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia*. *Ecology And Society* 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>

⁶⁸⁹ Downing, T. E. 1995. *Climate Change And World Food Security*. In *Proceedings Of The NATO Advanced Research Workshop*, 11-15 July 1993, Oxford UK. Springer, Heidelberg, Germany.

⁶⁹⁰ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*.

⁶⁹¹ Rahmato., Dessalegn (1987) 'The political economy of development in Ethiopia', in Keller, Ed and Rothchild, D. (eds), *Afro-Marxist Regimes: ideology and public policy*, pp. 155 -79. Boulder, Colo : Lynne Rienner.; Rahmato., Dessalegn (1987). 'The Peasants and the Comrades: problems and prospects of socialist transition in rural Ethiopia', paper presented at the African Studies Association Conference, Denver, Colorado

The Derg acknowledged the environmental degradation and population pressures faced in the highlands. To lessen the strain on the environment, the Derg began a resettlement scheme which moved people to more fertile areas elsewhere in Ethiopia. This was a highly unpopular policy. Ethiopia's regions are inhabited by several distinct ethnic groups with different languages and cultures. During the famine of 1984 resettlement from Tigray was scaled up by the Derg, forcefully relocating people from the highlands as part of their famine response.

The resettlement scheme faced political and social criticisms. Little attention was paid to the chances or opportunities at the destinations for the people who were relocated. Additionally, the main food producing and politically active age group was relocated, starving the Tigray region of its workforce and in many cases, of its leadership. Prior to the famine the resettlement scheme had had limited success. A study from 1984 found that none of the people who had been resettled prior to the famine were food secure or self-sufficient, instead they relied on government subsidies to stay alive.⁶⁹² When resettlement was scaled up to combat the 1984 famine the Derg already knew that the scheme was not an effective strategy for improving food security. This has led commentators to question the motives of the Derg, including fears of genocidal intent and the dissolution of political opposition.⁶⁹³

Unfortunately, the highlands of Ethiopia are no more fertile as a result of this mass forced relocation, and many who were resettled became reliant on food aid and government subsidies within the resettlement camps.⁶⁹⁴ One source indicates that in 1987, 800,000 people were resettled, however, 150,000 of these died as a result and 100,000 chose to leave their new locations in the search for better opportunities.⁶⁹⁵ Other more conservative estimates note that a minimum of 50,000 died from the resettlement scheme. Médecines Sans Frontiers (MSF) along with other aid agencies operating in the region at this time, including Oxfam and World Vision, believe that more people died of famine-like conditions and limited access to essential services in the resettlement camps, than those who escaped forced relocation and remained in Tigray. If verified this would be a shocking revelation.

Surplus producing Woredas

In the early 1980s the Peasant Agricultural Development Extension Program (PADEP), under the auspices of the World Bank and Ministry of Agriculture, suggested a plan for creating a set of policies which improved agricultural productivity in a number of '*surplus producing arejas*' within the country, which could sustain intensive agriculture. However, following domestic and international criticism of the government's handling of the 1984-85 famine, and in an attempt to

⁶⁹² Freedom House (1990) Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine.

⁶⁹³ Freedom House (1990) Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine.; De Waal (1997) Famine Crimes (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁶⁹⁴ Alemneh Dejene (1990) Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁹⁵ Freedom House (1990) Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine.

maintain control of their socialist agenda, the Derg rebranded the program as the '*surplus producing woredas*'. The Derg's policy was more expansive than the PADEP plan, introducing surplus producing woredas across Tigray, in locations which were not suitable for intensive agriculture due to insufficient rainfall and infertile soils.

These centrally controlled, state farm systems often ignored the interests and knowledge of local farmers. Decisions made from above on the use of fertilisers and poor choices of crops meant that many of these sites were not surplus producing at all. Strict grain quotas placed an additional burden on those living in these areas as they were often unable to meet their own needs, let alone produce more to provide to the Derg. New policies which restricted trade in these locations meant that petty trading was no longer an option when additional funds were needed. As such, the state farms provided an additional level of control over the Tigrayans, with non-farm activities also restricted and a ban on migration for seasonal labour. The farms removed the ability for many to sustain themselves through secondary income streams.⁶⁹⁶ Unfortunately, when the drought of 1987 hit, the farmers living in surplus producing areas were affected worse than other areas. Many more people had to rely on food aid within these Woredas than in other localities which did not receive the same government regulation.⁶⁹⁷ The mismanagement and reliance on unpaid labour led many disgruntled farmers to flee these systems for more autonomy.

Villagisation

Although development in Ethiopia was one of the Derg's priorities, under its banner "Ethiopia First", it is clear that the policy choices and attempts to speed up development were not always effective; some policies were even counterproductive. From 1985 onwards, the government sought to shortcut development of the rural sector by forcing families to move and create towns and villages,⁶⁹⁸ an initiative known as the villagisation scheme. On instruction and often through intimidation, families dismantled their homes, carried them on their backs and rebuilt them in new villages in locations selected by the government. The villagisation scheme faced intense resistance from families in the highlands. However, this resistance was met with new restrictive policies which coerced people into moving. For example, new legislation came into force which prevented families living in rural areas outside of the new village systems, from re-thatching their roofs. These policies sought to make it impossible for families to stay in rural communities.⁶⁹⁹

The houses were built in rows, similar to a western style town complex, something alien to the families who had lived spread out across the Ethiopian highlands. By 1988, the government claimed that nine million people in Tigray and Eritrea had

⁶⁹⁶ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).; De Waal (1990) *Famine Survival Strategies in Wollo, Tigray and Eritrea: A review of the Literature*. Oxford: Oxfam.

⁶⁹⁷ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁶⁹⁸ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).; National Villagisation Co-Ordinating Committee, *Rural Transformation*, Addis Ababa, 1987.

⁶⁹⁹ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*.

moved into these villages, accounting for one third of the rural community in less than four years.⁷⁰⁰ However, again this policy was hastily rolled out across the region. The new villages were not located in areas suitable for the influx of the surrounding rural communities. They quickly placed enormous stress on the immediate environment, leading to environmental degradation and a drop in agricultural productivity.⁷⁰¹ Populations soared and local facilities, such as schools, couldn't cope with the increased demand. With less food being produced, more people and accelerated environmental degradation, the villagisation scheme did not achieve its goal to develop the rural community and improve food security. Instead, food insecurity and hunger soared in the new villages across Tigray.⁷⁰²

A similarity across these three policies is the top-down approach applied by the Derg. Little care or consultation was given to the views of those forcibly resettled, those living within surplus producing woredas, or the people affected by villagisation. Scholars have argued that the agricultural development policies under Mengistu *"reveals a legacy of unforgivable folly, mismanagement and neglect."*⁷⁰³ These policy choices were met with intense scrutiny. Commentators have expressed their beliefs that there was a strong link between the development agenda of the Derg and food insecurity in the region.

Critics suspicious of the Derg have cited potential motives including population and ethnic control, and the suppression of insurrection.⁷⁰⁴ Under Mengistu's Marxist regime, it is unknown how many people really died as a result of these policies.

*"What is less well understood is that poor harvests lead to famine only when malign rulers allow it. It was not the weather that killed perhaps 1m people in 1983-85. It was the policies of a Marxist dictator..." The Economist*⁷⁰⁵

Other examples corroborate with the theory that government policies contributed to food insecurity in the 1980s. For example, the international relief effort was impeded by the government: ships of grain donated by the international community faced severe import fees and the government seized surplus grains from individual families which would usually allow them to make it through harder times.⁷⁰⁶ Most significantly, the government refused to supply trucks to the relief effort, and later used the internationally donated trucks to aid the forced resettlement agenda rather than to move aid around the region to those in need.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁰ The Ethiopian Herald, March 27, 1988, P.1, in Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁷⁰¹ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).; Goran Hyden (1980) *Beyond Ujamaa In Tanzania: Underdevelopment And An Uncaptured Peasantry*, Berkeley, University Of California Press.

⁷⁰² Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*

⁷⁰³ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*

⁷⁰⁴ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*.

⁷⁰⁵ The Economist (2021) *Ethiopia's government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon*, available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/01/23/ethiopias-government-appears-to-be-wielding-hunger-as-a-weapon>

⁷⁰⁶ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*.

⁷⁰⁷ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*.

7.4 Conflict-induced hunger

“A dangerous cocktail of the war combined with fragile soils, population pressure and poverty and climatic adversity led to a famine of biblical proportions in the Ethiopian Highlands of northern Ethiopia, including Tigray” The World Peace Foundation⁷⁰⁸

The least discussed, yet the most significant factor which has contributed to food insecurity in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, is conflict.⁷⁰⁹ Decades of civil wars, counter-insurgency campaigns and border conflicts have drastically disrupted development and food production in the region.⁷¹⁰ Tigray sits along the northern border with Eritrea; in many locations, the border is highly disputed. War is arguably the most devastating cause of food insecurity and is often overlooked by government policies and excluded from historical reports. Many accounts of the famine of 1984-85 ignore conflict as a cause of the famine at all. Rather than solely overpopulation or natural disasters, political failures or decisions appear integral to almost all famines.⁷¹¹ This was clearly the case in 1973-74, and 1984-85, and there are legitimate concerns about the impact of the ongoing conflict on food security.⁷¹²

The 1984-85 famine is widely acknowledged, yet acknowledgement of the full situation on the ground appears to be less documented. Although drought, harvest failures, as well as the agricultural and economic policies of the Derg all contributed to the famine, a significant cause of food insecurity in the region was the regime's counter-insurgency campaign in Tigray and north Wollo from 1980 to 1985 combined with the then ongoing war in Eritrea.

Critical literature on the famine indicates that the droughts the region faced were not bad enough to cause the widespread suffering seen in the news reports and documentaries. By using biblical language, the famine was placed out of human control. Analysis of the famine and information which crept out of the area reveals that this was not the case, and it appears those on the ground knew. However, the idea that the famine was a result of a drought, and environmental factors was not only misleading, but usefully disguised the real factors which contributed to, and prolonged the famine. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that successive droughts were fabricated by the Ethiopian government, with the support of the RRC. In 1984 the RRC claimed there had been a shortfall in food production in the years leading up to the famine due to successive droughts, despite their earlier reports outlining a high level of food production. Further evidence indicates that there was a drought in 1984, however, not the years prior. The drought provided an effective narrative for Mengitsu's regime, as it allowed them to access international

⁷⁰⁸ World Peace Foundation Report

⁷⁰⁹ Alemneh Dejene (1990) *Environment Famine And Politics In Ethiopia: A View From The Village* (Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

⁷¹⁰ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. *Ecology And Society* 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁷¹¹ De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation* (Polity Books, Cambridge).

⁷¹² World Peace Foundation (2021) *Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine*, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpff/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

aid, without the international community's awareness of the real causes of the crisis. The RRC was essential for procuring international assistance and fuelled the 'drought' narrative of the Derg.⁷¹³ In fact, evidence has shown that international aid was even syphoned off to help the counter-insurgency effort.⁷¹⁴

The counter-insurgency campaign led by the Derg in Tigray from 1980 till 1985, focussed on a number of Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) strongholds in the region. Starvation was used as a weapon of war, with sinister consequences: *"the zone of severe famine coincided with the war zone, and the phases of the developing famine corresponded with the major military actions"*.⁷¹⁵ The Derg restricted the freedom of movement within Tigray and imposed trading restrictions, while markets and transport links became the frequent target of aerial bombardment. This alone had significant consequences in both Tigray and Wollo during 1984-85 as it undermined the security of the rural community to migrate to earn money, and to sell their produce,⁷¹⁶ directly reinforcing the belief that starvation was a government policy. With new checkpoints and permits needed to allow movement, the rural economy was destabilised. Conscription to the army, as well as the forced resettlement programme, removed many able-bodied men from the agricultural sector.⁷¹⁷ This has had long term impacts on the region, as research has found that many households in Tigray were headed by women due to high fatalities during the wars along the Eritrean border and against the TPLF under the Derg's regime.⁷¹⁸

The Derg carried out scorched earth tactics, destroyed crops, ruined farmland, and slaughtered animals which were essential for agriculture, such as oxen. This reduced the capacity of the rural community to produce food, impacting not just one harvest, but subsequent harvests too. Food systems were further targeted by sieges, food blockades and enforced rationing.⁷¹⁹ As such, food production and supplies to the TPLF controlled areas were disrupted, causing food prices to soar above the means of many Tigrayans. The destruction of land, crops and the obstruction of aid not only posed a risk to human security but was a tool used by the Derg. In 1984, the Foreign Minister Tibebe Bekele was even quoted saying "food is a major element in our strategy against the successionists",⁷²⁰ indicating the systematic use of food to quell the rebellion in Tigray. To make matters worse, in July 1985 the tensions between the TPLF and Eritrea [EPLF], fuelled by contestation of the borders, caused further disruption to aid deliveries. The Eritrean army intercepted the aid supply

⁷¹³ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁷¹⁴ Alex De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation* (Polity Books, Cambridge); De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁷¹⁵ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana), P.115.

⁷¹⁶ World Peace Foundation (2021) *Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine*, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpff/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).; Alex De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation* (Polity Books, Cambridge).

⁷¹⁷ Freedom House (1990) *Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine*

⁷¹⁸ Weldearegay And Gebremichael Tedla (2018) *Impact Of Climate Variability On Household Food Availability In Tigray*: <https://agricultureandfoodsecurity.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40066-017-0154-0>

⁷¹⁹ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).; De Waal (1993) *War and Famine in Africa*, *IDS Bulletin* 24 (4): 33-40.; Macrae And Zwi (1994) *Famine, Complex Emergencies and International Policy in Africa: An Overview*, in J Macrae and A Zwi (eds) *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies*. London: Zed Press.

⁷²⁰ Korn (1986) *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

lines from Sudan, preventing food aid from reaching Tigrayans at a critical time.⁷²¹ To combat this the Tigrayans had to create a new supply line at great human cost.

The policy of starvation led by the Derg was also evident through the obstruction and manipulation of aid. Only 5.6% of the donated international aid went to families impacted by the famine in Tigray during 1984-85.⁷²² Aid was sent to government-controlled areas and distribution sites, and never reached many of the millions of people in the rural areas. The rural Tigrayan subsistence farmers have often borne the brunt of conflict in the region. It is clear that the aid agencies working on the ground were in an impossible situation; by exposing the regime, they would lose access to the people in desperate need of life saving assistance. This meant that many went along with the narrative to ensure they could carry out their work and gain international funding. This moral dilemma was brought to life when Médecins Sans Frontiers were expelled from Ethiopia for expressing their concerns regarding the situation.⁷²³ Despite famine shaking the region, the soldiers never went hungry. This redirection of aid to the military was widespread during the 1984-85 famine. Retrospective evidence even suggests that the United Nations Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE) was aware of the counter-insurgency campaigns, that aid was being diverted to militias and that the policy of forced resettlement was ongoing and harmful. This information was not included in their reports at the time, and it appears little was done to prevent this continuing, even when relief programmes and aid organised by the UNEOE were attacked. The double-edged sword was that aid prolonged the counter-insurgency campaigns, causing more suffering across Tigray and saving few of its intended beneficiaries.⁷²⁴

Despite the crisis being portrayed through an environmental lens, the international community was slow to provide aid. This was partly a result of Ethiopia's ideological and political alliance with the Soviet Union and the limited coverage on the ground due to the refusal of journalists' visas. However, the large national expenditure on the military was of great concern to the international community. The Derg controlled the largest army in Sub-Saharan Africa, draining the country's natural resources and wealth.⁷²⁵ During 1984, 46% of the national budget was spent on arms for their war with Northern Separatists. International donors felt that the Ethiopian Government should divert some of their own national GDP to the crisis rather than rely on international funding.⁷²⁶

The images of starving children which predominated in the media, created the illusion that all that was needed was food. In reality food could only keep people alive, it wouldn't stop a famine caused by conflict. This means that ending famines...

⁷²¹ Plaut (2016) *Understanding Eritrea: Inside Africa's Most Repressive State*. Hurst And Co Ltd, London.

⁷²² Africa Watch (1991) *Evil Days: Thirty Years Of War And Famine In Ethiopia*. New York And London: Human Rights Watch.

⁷²³ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁷²⁴ De Waal (1997) *Famine Crimes* (Indiana University Press, Indiana).

⁷²⁵ De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation* (Polity Books, Cambridge).

⁷²⁶ Moeller (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How The Media Sell Disease, Famine, War And Death*. Routledge, London.

*“demands more than Live Aid concerts or airdrops. It requires ending wars, securing human rights, abating population growth and preparing in advance for predictable disasters” The New York Times*⁷²⁷

7.5 The Development Decades (1999 - 2020)

After the overthrow of the Derg during the Ethiopian People’s Revolution of 1999, the following three decades marked considerable development and progress in the standard of living for Tigrayans, and Ethiopians at large. Although consecutive droughts have impacted rural livelihoods and ongoing border conflicts increased displacement, governmental policies have been implemented which aimed to reduce hunger and prevent disasters on the scale of the 1980s. For example, the new regime put in place a long-term Agriculture Development Led Industrialisation (ALDI) strategy which aimed to improve farmers’ food security across Ethiopia. The Tigray Regional Government followed suit, creating their own strategy based on conversation and rehabilitation of the natural landscape, with the aim to improve food security.⁷²⁸ The plan included hillside rehabilitation through afforestation and terracing, the development of irrigation systems through the construction of reservoirs, and the diversification of crops grown in the region. Help was given to farmers through subsidies for fertilisers and micro-finance mechanisms.⁷²⁹

This long-term plan, which relied on active participation from local people (rather than the top-down policies of the Derg) has seen a number of benefits across the region. By providing access to new technologies and sharing knowledge on farming practises that were suitable for the land, small farmers were able to improve their output. In 2002, the plan was revised and updated, reflecting the continued emphasis by the regional government on improving food security in Tigray.⁷³⁰ A study which investigated the effectiveness of this plan indicated an 8.6% increase in food self-sufficiency in Tigray between 2000 and 2008.⁷³¹ Another successful policy supporting local families included the food-for-work program, which improved food security and asset procurement in rural areas of Tigray.⁷³² The successes felt by the regional government proved that policies can be effective when implemented with local knowledge at local level.⁷³³

⁷²⁷ *The New York Times* 1991, As Cited In: Moeller (1999) Compassion Fatigue: How The Media Sell Disease, Famine, War And Death. Routledge, London.

⁷²⁸ Federal Democratic Republic Of Ethiopia (FDRE). 1994. An Economic Development Strategy For Ethiopia. Federal Democratic Republic Of Ethiopia (FDRE), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

⁷²⁹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷³⁰ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. Ecology And Society 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁷³¹ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. Ecology And Society 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁷³² Gilligan, D. O., And J. Hoddinott. 2007. Is There Persistence In The Impact Of Emergency Food Aid? Evidence On Consumption, Food Security, And Assets In Rural Ethiopia. American Journal Of Agricultural Economics 89:225-242.; Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. Ecology And Society 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

⁷³³ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. Ecology And Society 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>.

Although these measures improved food security in Tigray, a combination of overpopulation and insufficient land meant that families, specifically in the Central and Eastern areas of Tigray, could no longer be self-sufficient relying on subsistence farming alone.⁷³⁴ Thus, many families rely on multiple income streams to ensure that they can meet their needs and buy food from the local markets. In recognition of this, the regional government invested in creating new labour opportunities. Commercial sesame production began, alongside a boom in artisanal mining and other industry, providing more seasonal and migratory work options for households across the region.⁷³⁵ Tigray is the second largest sesame producing region in Ethiopia, producing one third of the country's sesame exports.⁷³⁶ The seasonal sesame industry employs 200,000 labourers in Tigray,⁷³⁷ and supports up to 15% of the regional population.⁷³⁸ Many families in Western Tigray, where sesame production is largely concentrated, benefit from the influx of seasonal workers and rely upon this freedom of movement.

The regional government also supported the creation of a conglomerate of over 30 manufacturing companies under the EFFORT scheme. Research has indicated that these businesses were established using resources which were accumulated by the TPLF during the counter-insurgency against the Derg in the 1980s, indicating the strong links between these businesses and the TPLF.⁷³⁹ The businesses ranged from construction, to pharmaceutical manufacturing, mining and food production. The EFFORT conglomerate created approximately 47,000 jobs for people across Tigray and had assets worth over \$500 million.⁷⁴⁰ Haile Selassie once stated that Ethiopia could become a global leader in gold, due to the rich deposits found in Western Ethiopia.⁷⁴¹ However, it was only in the 2000s that mining licenses began to be granted. Now mining is a lucrative business, with gold mining employing 120,000 Tigrayans by 2018⁷⁴² and Sapphire mining north of Aksum, employing a further 10,000 people. These labour opportunities are integral to the survival of many families. In response to the movement of people for work, the regional government

⁷³⁴ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷³⁵ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷³⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service, Ethiopia Oilseeds Report Annual, January 21, 2021.

⁷³⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷³⁸ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷³⁹ Sarah Vaughan and Mesfin Gebremichael (2011) Rethinking business and politics in Ethiopia: The role of EFFORT, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray, Research Report.

⁷⁴⁰ Hauge, Jostein, and Ha-Joon Chang, 'The Concept of a 'Developmental State' in Ethiopia,' Essay in Oxford Handbook of the Ethiopian Economy, edited by Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer, and Arkebe Oqubay, 824-39, Oxford University Press, 2019.; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷⁴¹ Bullock (2018) Ethiopia Could Be Sitting On One Of The Worlds Great Untapped Gold Deposits, The Conversation, Available At: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopia-could-be-sitting-on-one-of-worlds-great-untapped-gold-deposits-90408>

⁷⁴² Veljkovic, Zarko, Hilmi S. Salem, Benard Ayongaba, and Yohannes Yihdego, 'Mining Sector Challenges in Developing Countries, Tigray, Ethiopia and Inspirational Success Stories from Australia,' International Journal of Mining and Mineral Engineering 9, no. 4 (2018): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijmme.2018.10018510>.

invested in road infrastructure. As a result, according to the World Bank by 2016 more than 50% of Tigrayans lived within 2Km of a well-conditioned road. This was higher than the national average which sat at 22%.⁷⁴³

In 2005, the Ethiopian federal government introduced the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) with support from USAID, the World Bank and a suite of European donors.⁷⁴⁴ This set of mechanisms came in various forms including food vouchers, food or cash. According to the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET), these transfers could have covered up to 50% of a rural household's food needs.⁷⁴⁵ During 2015, when 80% of Tigrayans were still classified as subsistence farmers,⁷⁴⁶ a harvest failure hit Tigray. However, it was not as disastrous as it could have been, as the PSNP payments allowed its beneficiaries to remain on their farms, without having to sell off their assets, such as their livestock which were essential for farming.⁷⁴⁷ The benefits of this system have been celebrated by other African nations, many of which are now looking to set up their own PSNP systems. In 2018, it is estimated that 18% of the Tigrayan population was reliant on these PSNP payments to meet their food needs.⁷⁴⁸

Between 2003 and 2014 the number of people receiving emergency aid dropped from 15 million to 5.6 million. By 2016, the number of Ethiopians who were food secure rose by 20%, leaving only 24% of population without access to enough calories for survival.⁷⁴⁹ Although food insecurity was not eradicated, this signifies considerable progress.⁷⁵⁰ This improvement has been attributed to the work of international donors and the PSNP.⁷⁵¹ Since the end of the Derg regime, the lifting of restrictions on business has allowed the private business sector to flourish.⁷⁵² The international donor community in collaboration with the regional government worked hard to improve food security in the region to make sure that a calamity of the scale of the 1980s didn't happen again.⁷⁵³

⁷⁴³ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; The World Bank Group, *Measuring Rural Access: Using New Technologies*, 2016. Many Of These Roads Were Constructed With Voluntary Labor By The Communities

⁷⁴⁴ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

⁷⁴⁵ FEWS NET, *Food Security Outlook February 2021 To September 2021*; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷⁴⁶ <https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/ethiopia/news-and-events/2015/irish-aid-food-security-tigray/>

⁷⁴⁷ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

⁷⁴⁸ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷⁴⁹ The Economist (2021) The war in Tigray is taking a frightful human toll, available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/04/15/the-war-in-tigray-is-taking-a-frightful-human-toll>

⁷⁵⁰ Van Der Veen, A., And Tagel, G. 2011. Effect Of Policy Interventions On Food Security In Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. *Ecology And Society* 16(1): 18. [Online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art18/>

⁷⁵¹ Care (2014) Achieving Food And Nutrition Security In Ethiopia: Findings from the CARE Learning Tour to Ethiopia, Available at: https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ethiopia_trip_reportv3.pdf

⁷⁵² Care (2014) Achieving Food And Nutrition Security In Ethiopia: Findings from the CARE Learning Tour to Ethiopia, Available at: https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ethiopia_trip_reportv3.pdf

⁷⁵³ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

Even with the immense progress seen across Ethiopia, specifically in Tigray, in 2014 research demonstrated that more than 2 in every 5 children were stunted due to a lack of nutrition. This has long term impacts and can lead to physical and cognitive impairment. As such, the World Food Program estimated that the long-term impact of chronic hunger and malnutrition cost Ethiopia 16.5% of its GDP annually.⁷⁵⁴ Between 1991 and 2019, Ethiopia's Human Development Index had greatly improved, with the sharpest rise in indicators such as education and income, noted between the years 2000-2014.⁷⁵⁵ By 2018, the poverty rate had halved, child mortality had been reduced by 70% and measures had been introduced which aimed to mitigate the impact of drought.⁷⁵⁶

Although there was progress for food security, restrictive policies were impacting the right to engage in political life and advocacy across Ethiopia. TPLF strongholds significantly benefitted from resources and favourable policies. Mekelle's bustling streets, improved connectivity and facility of services provided evidence that resources were being channelled away from the majority of Ethiopians, to one ethnic minority.⁷⁵⁷ The inequitable development, ethnic divisions and discontent led to a series of violent protests against the government and its military, who consisted mostly of the former TPLF party. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn responded to anti-government protests by resigning in 2018, and was replaced by Abiy Ahmed, the current Prime Minister. It was clear that the Ethiopian population was fed up of being left behind, and was seeking change.

By 2020 Ethiopia had one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, leading the world bank to speculate that by 2030 Ethiopia could be a Middle-Income Country (MIC) if development continued.⁷⁵⁸ This appeared to be a goal for many in the leadership, a way to shake off the historical image of chronic hunger that Ethiopia has carried since the famine of 1973-74. The improvements in Ethiopia are noticeable, with a reduction in poverty, economic growth and lengthening of life expectancy. The government has promoted women's education and family planning in an attempt to control the population and lessen the burden on the strained environment.⁷⁵⁹ However, reaching an MIC status relies upon peace being maintained and environmental stability.⁷⁶⁰ In 2020 prior to the onset of conflict, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) trends for Ethiopia were promising. From 2000-2020 Ethiopia's GHI score had been improving, with undernourishment, stunting, wasting and infant mortality all on the decrease. Ethiopia was ranked 92nd of the 107

⁷⁵⁴ Care (2014) Achieving Food And Nutrition Security In Ethiopia: Findings from the CARE Learning Tour to Ethiopia, Available at: https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ethiopia_trip_reportv3.pdf

⁷⁵⁵ UNDP (2020) The Human Development Report: The Next Frontier, Human Development And The Anthropocene, Available At: <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf>

⁷⁵⁶ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

⁷⁵⁷ Jason Burke (2020) Rise and fall of Ethiopia's TPLF - from rebels to rulers and back, The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/25/rise-and-fall-of-ethiopias-tplf-tigray-peoples-liberation-front>

⁷⁵⁸ Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again. The Conversation, 17/11/2020. <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seen-famine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>.

⁷⁵⁹ Moreland And Smith, 2012 'Modelling Climate Change, Food Security And Population: Pilot Testing The Model In Ethiopia'. New Orleans: Tulane University, Futures Group.

⁷⁶⁰ De Waal (2018) *Mass Starvation*, (Polity Press, Cambridge) Chapter 8.

countries investigated for Global Hunger, with the level of hunger in the country calculated as 'serious'. This means that despite improvements many were still living on the edge of food insecurity.

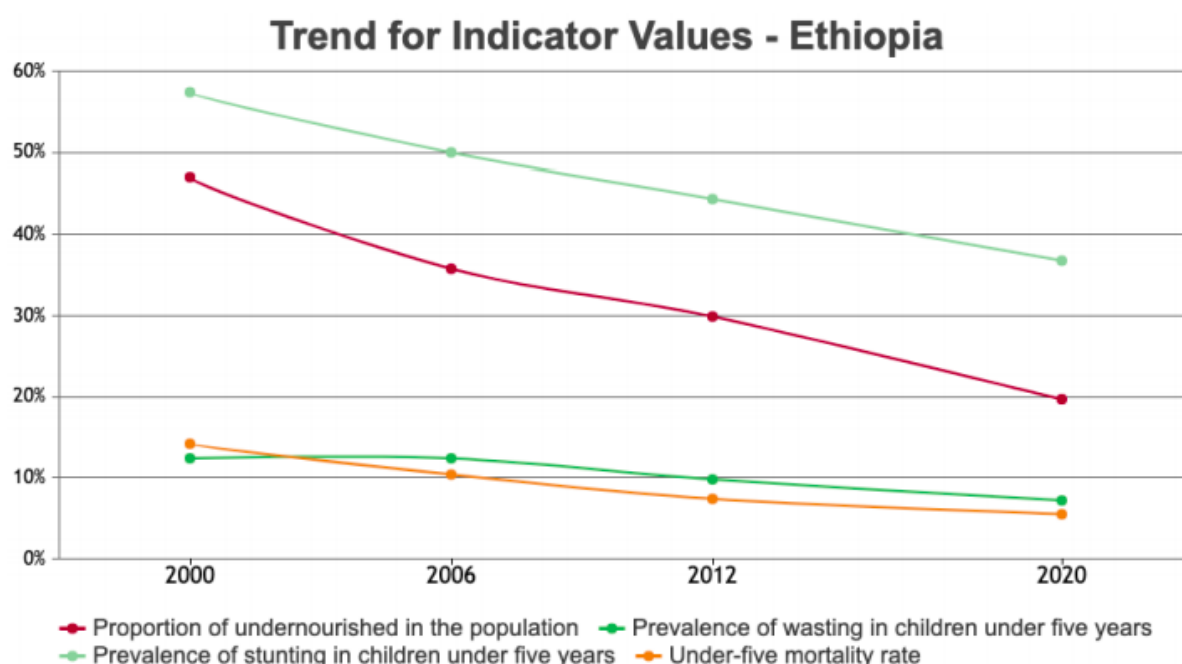


Table from the Global Hunger Index⁷⁶¹

Food security in Tigray before conflict began

In Tigray, three decades of development had improved living standards. Although poverty reduction has been seen across Ethiopia, it was perhaps most pronounced in Tigray, as federal resources were directed to the region, which represented a TPLF stronghold.⁷⁶² Poverty reduction was also perhaps the most observable in Tigray, as only 30 years earlier the famine had made headline international news. More children were attending school than ever before, health services were more efficient, and women's rights were on the rise, a result of grass-roots level activism.⁷⁶³ The creation of an effective banking system in Tigray had allowed many Tigrayans to save their money in banks, improving families' security during harder times.

According to the UN's Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), an internationally recognised measure for the level of food security in specific geographic areas, prior to the conflict Tigray was deemed food secure (IPC Phase

⁷⁶¹ The Global Hunger Index (2021) Ethiopia, Available at: <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/ethiopia.html>.

⁷⁶² Jason Burke (2020) Rise and fall of Ethiopia's TPLF - from rebels to rulers and back, The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/25/rise-and-fall-of-ethiopias-tplf-tigray-peoples-liberation-front>

⁷⁶³ Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again. The Conversation, 17/11/2020. <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seen-famine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>.

1).⁷⁶⁴ Harvest outputs had been near average between 2016 and 2019, although this still meant that chronic hunger existed in a number of areas of Tigray.⁷⁶⁵ By October 2020, the IPC measure indicated that food security in Tigray was 'Stressed' (IPC Phase 2) whilst Western Tigray was food secure.⁷⁶⁶ Similarly, using the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS NET), another mechanism for determining food security, in November 2020 prior to the conflict most of Tigray was deemed food secure (similar to IPC Phase 1) while some areas were viewed as Stressed (IPC Phase 2).⁷⁶⁷



⁷⁶⁴ The Economist (2021) Tigray Is Edging Closer To Famine, Available At: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/04/22/tigray-is-edging-closer-to-famine>.

⁷⁶⁵ FEWS NET (2020) Analysis of the Food Security Situation in Tigray (October) Available at: <https://fews.net/east-africa/ethiopia>

⁷⁶⁶ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; Ethiopia IPC Technical Working Group, *Ethiopia IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis*, 2020, Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ipc_ethiopia_acute_food_insecurity_2020oct2021sept_report.pdf; 'Ethiopia: Acute Food Insecurity Update (Dates TBC),' Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, Available at: <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/events/events-details/en/c/1153065/>

⁷⁶⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

In November 2020, the IPC framework predicted that the state of food security in July-September 2021 would have been 'Crisis' (IPC Phase 3), uncoincidentally combined with the 'annual hunger season' - a period of the year where there is often food insecurity as it falls between the two harvests. At this point, it is predicted that lifesaving support would be needed, even if there had been no conflict. The situation this year was exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic, its impact on migratory work, and a locust invasion which had consumed the grain reserves in South, South East, Eastern and Central Tigray.⁷⁶⁹ Although some scholars have refuted that the desert locust invasion was devastating for food security,⁷⁷⁰ others believed the desert locust invasion alone could have caused another famine in areas of Tigray.⁷⁷¹ The rise in safety net systems, banking and additional revenue streams could have prevented food insecurity from reaching famine level in the affected areas. However, the addition of conflict severely hampers attempts to maintain food security.

The desert locust invasion had impacted the September-January harvest, leaving many vulnerable. The conflict which erupted in November 2020, has also disrupted the remaining September-January harvest and prevented the essential practises of land preparation during the months of April and May before the Kiremt rainy season begins in June. This means the impact of the current conflict on food insecurity is not yet fully understood, but it could be devastating.⁷⁷² For humanitarians, there is grave concern that history is going to repeat itself should the conflict not be stopped and food security prioritised. This time, in comparison to 1984 and despite the attempted information blackout, the world is aware of the conflict and it is watching.

Conflict and Hunger

"First there was COVID, then locust swarms, then disruptions and destructions due to war, including burning and stealing of crops" Jan Nyssen, Professor at Ghent University⁷⁷³

Despite the developments which benefitted Tigray, before conflict began OCHA estimated that 950,000 people were reliant on food aid for survival in Tigray. Shortly

⁷⁶⁸ IPC, 'The IPC Famine Fact Sheet' (IPC, December 2020), Available at:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC_Famine_Factsheet_2020Nov_0.pdf Accessed 28 June 2021

⁷⁶⁹ Mercy Corps (2020) Desert Locusts In East Africa, Available At: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/desert-locusts-east-africa-plague-another-order>; fao (2020) Desert Locust Bulletin, Available At:

<http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/common/ecg/562/en/dl505e.pdf>; OCHA (2021) Ethiopia Situation Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁷⁷⁰ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷⁷¹ Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again, The Conversation, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seenfamine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>

⁷⁷² Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again, The Conversation, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seenfamine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>

⁷⁷³ Nyssen (2021) The Situation In Tigray At The Beginning Of 2021, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348296742_The_situation_in_Tigray_at_the_beginning_of_2021

after the onset of conflict, an additional 1.3 million people were in need of emergency assistance, while 62,225 Tigrayans had fled across the border into neighbouring Sudan.⁷⁷⁴ Despite a communications blackout in the region, since November 2020 there have been horrifying reports of massacres, ethnic cleansing, torture, forced conscription and attacks on refugee camps.⁷⁷⁵ Human rights organisations corroborated by open-source evidence, indicate that pillaging, looting, the destruction of property, slaughtering of livestock and burning of land is indeed widespread and systematic.⁷⁷⁶ Sexual based violence against women has been widely reported, including accounts of women being forced to exchange sex for essential items, such as food and water.⁷⁷⁷ These activities have made the people living in Tigray even more vulnerable to food insecurity, as they are unable to access objects indispensable for their survival.

The latest conflict began during the peak harvest season of September-January. From the locust invasion to conflict, harvests were impeded across Tigray. The locust invasion was particularly damaging in South Tigray, while ongoing conflict with Amhara militia interrupted the harvest in Western Tigray. The harvests in towns and villages along the main roads throughout Tigray were also disrupted by Eritrean and Ethiopian troops.⁷⁷⁸ Many had to harvest crops early to limit the impact of the locusts, and before conflict reached their communities. As such, the grain that was harvested in many locations was not fully grown and so of limited use, decimating the agricultural output of the region early on in the conflict. Furthermore, witness accounts highlight a frightening trend that little of the harvested crops remained within the rural communities, with immediate impact on the food security of many households.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁴ OCHA (28 February 2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update; Situation Report. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-28-february-2021>; Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁷⁷⁵ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At:

<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁷⁷⁶ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>.

⁷⁷⁷ United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (2021) Ms. Pramila Patten, urges all parties to prohibit the use of sexual violence and cease hostilities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, Press Release, Available at: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/united-nations-special-representative-of-the-secretary-general-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict-ms-pramila-patten-urges-all-parties-to-prohibit-the-use-of-sexual-violence-and-cease-hostilities-in-the/>

⁷⁷⁸ Nyssen (2021) The Situation In Tigray At The Beginning Of 2021, Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348296742_The_situation_in_Tigray_at_the_beginning_of_2021

⁷⁷⁹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

Food security is more than food availability, it is also whether food is physically and economically accessible.⁷⁸⁰ This means that displacement, the targeting of food systems and shocks to the economy can have a direct impact on food security. The decades of development seen in Tigray have increased its ability to deal with droughts through economic development and technical innovations in the agricultural sector. However, these developments have also left Tigray more vulnerable to the impacts of conflict. For example, as well as cutting the region off from national funding, the heralded new banking system which had provided Tigrayans with economic security has been targeted and has remained inaccessible since November. The improved seasonal and migratory labour opportunities Tigrayans have valued over the past few decades, have also come under attack. The roads which helped the region to develop, are now a vehicle for destruction, allowing the Ethiopian Government, Eritrean Army and Amhara forces to easily negotiate the country's landscape, looting and devastating on their way.⁷⁸¹ By focussing on these new vulnerabilities through an economic offensive and a military campaign, it appears that starvation is a tool and a political objective of the federal Government.

By January 2021, aid workers were beginning to use the word famine to describe their view of what was happening on the ground in Northwest Tigray. Leaked minutes from the Tigray Emergency Coordination Centre meeting noted that: *"People are dying because of starvation. In Adwa people are dying while they are sleeping."*⁷⁸² The figures in January ranged from 2.2 million⁷⁸³ to 4 million people already in need of food aid.⁷⁸⁴ In the North-western, Central and Eastern woredas of Tigray, up to 50% of the inhabitants were already estimated to be in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.⁷⁸⁵ In Adigrat, *"Everybody is asking for food"* said the Médecins Sans Frontiers' emergency programme coordinator in an interview in January. *"Every time we reach a new area, we find food, water, health services depleted, and a lot of fear among the population."*⁷⁸⁶

In a joint statement by the Tigray Independence Party, Salsay Weyane Tigray, and National Congress of Great Tigray in February, the parties stated that without immediate food aid and medical supplies to the region, a *"looming humanitarian*

⁷⁸⁰ FAO (2006) Food Security, Policy Brief, Available at:

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/faoitaly/documents/pdf/pdf_food_security_concept_note.pdf

⁷⁸¹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At:

<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁷⁸² BBC (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Fear of Mass Starvation, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55695123>

⁷⁸³ Nyssen (2021) The Situation In Tigray At The Beginning Of 2021, Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348296742_The_situation_in_Tigray_at_the_beginning_of_2021; Inter-Cluster

Coordination Group and UNICEF Ethiopia (2020) Updated Humanitarian Response Plan for Northern Ethiopia, Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/northern_ethiopia_updated_humanitarian_response_plan_second_iteration_web.pdf

⁷⁸⁴ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia, Access Snapshot – Tigray Region, Available at:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_210120_snapshot_tigray02.pdf

⁷⁸⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁷⁸⁶ Reuters (2021) Ethiopians dying, hungry and fearful in war-hit Tigray: agencies, Available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-iduskbn29p0x1>

disaster of biblical proportion" would be a "gruesome reality in Tigray".⁷⁸⁷ However, access restrictions implemented by the federal government has greatly impeded the work of relief agencies, including the United Nations. The limited agencies which have been allowed to operate in the region have been met with hostility and some have become the targets of attacks.

"Today it could be one, two or three, but you know after a month it means thousands... After two months it will be tens of thousands" Abera Tola, the president of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society commenting on the death toll⁷⁸⁸

By April 2021, approximately 6 million people were impacted by conflict, with every part of Tigray hit by devastation.⁷⁸⁹ In a written statement on the 15 April, Linda Thomas Greenfield the US Ambassador to the United Nations Security Council, indicated estimates that as many as 5.2 million people were food insecure and required assistance.⁷⁹⁰ This assistance has been continually hindered by the presence of Eritrean forces and the federal government's restrictions on humanitarian access.

"The campaign of deprivation goes beyond immediate needs. It is sending Tigray back to a stone-age economy in which people are forced to live hand-to-mouth and depend on charity" Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation⁷⁹¹

In a closed-door meeting of the UN Security Council in April 2021, Mark Lowcock reiterated earlier claims that people were already starving to death.⁷⁹² Many conflict-affected communities have been left without food supplies, seeds for the next harvest, livestock or safe housing. Their financial savings and supplementary incomes have been removed. When information does seep out from behind the communication blackout, it indicates that the conditions on the ground in Tigray are far worse than any predictions.

"[H]unger, among peasantry, is crippling" Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, Senior Fellow at the World Peace Foundation & TPLF member⁷⁹³

It is imperative to view the ongoing conflict within the context of a region which has faced historical food insecurity due to conflict, poor governmental policies and

⁷⁸⁷ BBC (2021) Tigray crisis: Ethiopia region at risk of huge 'humanitarian disaster', Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55905108>

⁷⁸⁸ Walsh (2021) Ethiopia's War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>

⁷⁸⁹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>; Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁷⁹⁰ United States Mission to the United Nations (2021) Statement by US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas Greenfield on the Situation in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Available at: <https://usun.usmission.gov/statement-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-on-the-situation-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

⁷⁹¹ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

⁷⁹² BBC (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Fear of Mass Starvation, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55695123>

⁷⁹³ World Peace Foundation (2021) "They Have Destroyed Tigray, Literally": Mulugeta Gebrehiwot speaks from the mountains of Tigray, Transcript of phone call available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/files/2021/01/mulugeta-call-27-jan-full-transcript1-1.pdf>

climate vulnerability. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic, locust invasion and now conflict has created a fragile situation for many. While the term ‘famine’ has political ramifications, especially in a country with a history like Ethiopia’s, the classification of a famine is procedural. To classify as a famine the crisis must have a death rate of two in 10,000 people each day from malnutrition, more than 30% of children under five need to classify as acutely malnourished, and at least one in five households will be facing an extreme lack of food.⁷⁹⁴ This means that prior to reaching a ‘famine’ there has been considerable loss of life and widespread suffering. Although the criterion was not met across the whole Tigray region, by June, both the IPC and the UN Humanitarian Chief Mark Lowcock had confirmed the international community’s fears. IPC Phase 5 ‘famine’ had struck Tigray again, within several woredas.

“[T]his report... paints a picture of a very, very extreme situation. There is famine now... there is famine now in Tigray. The number of people in famine conditions, in IPC 5 conditions, is higher than anywhere in the world, at any moment since one quarter of one million Somali’s lost their lives in 2011. There’s another 2 million people just a step away from those extreme situations.... And this is going to get a lot worse.” Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Despite denials by the Ethiopian Government,⁷⁹⁵ the IPC’s report suggests that in June, 350,000 people were already facing famine-like conditions.⁷⁹⁶ No area within Tigray remained within the “minimal” IPC Phase 1 classification.⁷⁹⁷ Humanitarian workers relayed the worrying scenes from IDP camps in Axum and Adwa in early June. Starvation was already visible among women and children. Gaunt and lethargic, their energy conserved to keep them alive.⁷⁹⁸ The improvements to food security outlined earlier in this chapter have been undermined. Decades of development undone in a matter of months. A cause of great concern for the international community which has invested in this region’s development, improving its capacity to prevent a repeat of 1984. Foreign charities and donors are watching in shock, as years of hard work unravel before their eyes.⁷⁹⁹

7.6 Starvation in international law

⁷⁹⁴ FEWS NET (n.d.) IPC Classification, Available at: <https://fews.net/ipc>.

⁷⁹⁵ Office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia (2021) Livestream, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISmTarD16Y8>

⁷⁹⁶ IPC (2021) Ethiopia: Acute Food Insecurity Situation May-June 2021 and Projection for July-September, Available at: <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/resources/resources-details/en/c/1154899/>

⁷⁹⁷ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

⁷⁹⁸ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

⁷⁹⁹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

“It is a crime to starve civilians deliberately by shutting down electricity, water, road transport, banking services, food distribution; and denying access to humanitarian services for over 65 days” Jan Nyssen, Professor at Ghent University⁸⁰⁰

Starvation is unacceptable in peacetime or war. The international community have expressed this shared belief through the codification of the right to food, across an array of agreements, including the United Nations Charter,⁸⁰¹ International Human Rights Law,⁸⁰² Customary International Law, International Humanitarian Law,⁸⁰³ International Criminal Law,⁸⁰⁴ thematic treaties,⁸⁰⁵ and thematic resolutions.⁸⁰⁶ Removing access to food through displacement, obstruction of aid, and destroying people’s means to access food is illegal in international law.⁸⁰⁷ Starvation used as a weapon or tool of war is prohibited in the Geneva Convention and its Protocols,⁸⁰⁸ and starvation is a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court’.⁸⁰⁹ The War Crime of Starvation refers to more than the deprivation of food, but also of objects indispensable to survival.⁸¹⁰ This includes medicines, safe drinking water, sanitation, financial savings and shelter.

As information has slowly leaked out of Tigray, the international community has been awakened to the horrors behind the communication blackout. Humanitarians on the ground also paint a solemn picture. A report by the World Peace Foundation, entitled ‘Starving Tigray’ collated the evidence available on the conflict as of March 2021. It appears that through systematic and widespread attacks on objects indispensable to survival and the wilful impediment of humanitarian relief, the Governments of both Ethiopia and Eritrea are starving the people of Tigray.⁸¹¹ In Western Tigray, the targeting of civilians by Amhara militia has been described as

⁸⁰⁰ Nyssen (2021) The Situation In Tigray At The Beginning Of 2021, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348296742_The_situation_in_Tigray_at_the_beginning_of_2021

⁸⁰¹ The United Nations Charter (1945) Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>

⁸⁰² For Example: The International Covenant On Economic, Social And Cultural Rights; The International Covenant On Civil And Political Rights; The European Convention On Human Rights; And The Inter American Convention Of Human Rights; The African Charter On Human And People’s Rights.

⁸⁰³ For example: The Geneva Conventions and Its Protocols; The San Remo Manual On Naval Warfare; The Missile/ Air Warfare Manual.

⁸⁰⁴ For example: The Rome Statute Of The International Criminal Courts; The International Residual Mechanism For Criminal Tribunals Statute; The Malabo Protocol African Court Of Justice And Human Rights.

⁸⁰⁵ For example: The Convention Against Torture And Other Cruel, Inhuman Or Degrading Treatment Or Punishment (CAT); The Convention On The Rights Of The Child (CRC)

⁸⁰⁶ For Example: UNGA Right To Food Resolution; UNSC Conflict And Hunger 2417 Resolution.

⁸⁰⁷ For example, these activities are prohibited within: The Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols; The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

⁸⁰⁸ International law prohibiting starvation in conflict (through tool or weapon of war) refers to the obstruction, or attacks on, objects indispensable for survival and impediment of relief efforts, See: The Geneva Convention, Article 54(1) of Protocol One and Article 14 of Protocol Two prohibit starvation as a method of war and method of combat, respectively, at: International Committee of the Red Cross, ‘International Humanitarian Law Database: Practise Relating to Rule 53: Starvation as a method of warfare’, (ICRC, no date), Available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule53.

⁸⁰⁹ The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article (8) (2) (b) (xxv) and (8)(2)(e)(xxv), at: UNGA, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (17 July 1998; last amended 2019).

⁸¹⁰ The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article (8) (2) (b) (xxv) and (8)(2)(e)(xxv), at: UNGA, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (17 July 1998; last amended 2019).; Additionally, scholars have suggested that the international community should consider “conduct that impedes activities indispensable to survival to be a form of depriving the affected persons of objects indispensable to survival.” See: World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸¹¹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

ethnic cleansing.⁸¹² Thus, raising concerns that what we see unfolding may constitute a genocide of the Tigrayan people.⁸¹³ Derogatory language has been used to describe Tigrayans within the Ethiopian media, such as ‘daylight Hyenas’ or the ‘unfamiliar others’.⁸¹⁴ Restrictions on movement and targeted human rights violations provide additional evidence that ethnically motivated violence is occurring in Tigray.⁸¹⁵

“Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon; a rebel region is being starved into submission” The Economist⁸¹⁶

The situation in Tigray poses a great challenge to the international community, as the remainder of this chapter will show. Despite the communication blackout and attempts made to restrict information leaving Tigray, evidence suggests that ‘Starvation crimes’ have and continue to occur.⁸¹⁷ The Ethiopian Penal Code prohibits starvation crimes, and acts of genocide, and provides possible avenues for prosecuting perpetrators.⁸¹⁸ For example, the Marxist leader Mengistu Haile Mariam was charged with genocide in 2007 for crimes under his leadership in the 1970s. Accountability was achieved, but many years later.⁸¹⁹ As such, it appears inconceivable that this route for accountability would be taken in the near future, considering the perpetrators are the Federal Government and its Eritrean and Amhara partners. For now, the responsibility must fall to the international community to collect, protect, and review the evidence of starvation crimes in Tigray.

The gravity of the human rights violations ongoing in Tigray has raised discussions on whether there should be international accountability using International Criminal Law. For example, the Rome Statute and the International Criminal Court entered into force in 2002 to deal with the most severe crimes of concern to the international community. In international criminal proceedings, whether the conflict represents a Non-International Armed Conflict or an International Armed Conflict could impact the routes for gaining accountability. Although there is widespread belief that

⁸¹² Reuters (2021) Ethiopia rejects U.S. allegations of ethnic cleansing in Tigray, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2B50ES>

⁸¹³ Federica Iezzi (2021) Genocide in Tigray, Nena News, Available at: <http://nena-news.it/focus-on-africa-genocidio-nel-tigray/>; Aid to the Church in Need (2021) Ethiopia, ‘Genocide is happening in Tigray’, Aleteia, Available at: <https://aleteia.org/2021/06/02/ethiopia-genocide-is-happening-in-tigray/>

⁸¹⁴ Alex de Waal (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57226551>

⁸¹⁵ Alex de Waal (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57226551>

⁸¹⁶ The Economist (2021) Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon, available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/01/23/ethiopias-government-appears-to-be-wielding-hunger-as-a-weapon>

⁸¹⁷ Here ‘Starvation Crimes’ Refers To: The Elements Of The War Crime Of Starvation Under The Rome Statute; The Elements of the crimes listed under Article 54(1) Of Protocol One And Article 14 Of Protocol Two Of The Geneva Convention Which Prohibit Starvation As A Method Of War And Method Of Combat, Respectively. A term coined by academic Bridget Conley, see: Conley and de Waal (2019) The Purposes of Starvation: Historical and Contemporary Uses, Journal of International Criminal Justice, Volume 17 (4) pp.699-702.

⁸¹⁸ The International Committee of The Red Cross IHL Database: “Under Ethiopia’s Penal Code (1957), it is a war crime to organize, order or engage in “wilful reduction to starvation” of the civilian population, in time of war, armed conflict or occupation.” Available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule53_sectiona

⁸¹⁹ Alex de Waal (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57226551>

Eritrean troops are operating in collaboration with the Ethiopian government, other unverified reports signal the presence of Emirati drones and Somali soldiers.⁸²⁰ Given the evidence currently available, the conflict appears to be a Non-International Armed Conflict between Ethiopia (supported by Eritrea) and the TPLF; however, lawyers would need to confirm this when carrying out criminal proceedings. In 2019 the War Crime of Starvation was amended to include Non-International Armed Conflicts; however, this has not yet come into force.⁸²¹

To complicate matters, Ethiopia is not a state party to the Rome Statute. This means that the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction over Ethiopia. There are only two ways accountability using the Rome Statute could be possible: if the United Nations Security Council refers the case to the court,⁸²² or if a domestic court which has universal jurisdiction over War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity decides to pursue accountability. The former seems unlikely given China's policy of non-interference and Russia's recent objections to Security Council Statements on the conflict.⁸²³ On 2 June, the Belgian Federal Prosecutor announced that it is investigating War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Ethiopia.⁸²⁴ Testimonies by Belgian victims of the conflict have sparked the investigation. Their families had been executed, property looted and destroyed. As well as accountability at the international or domestic level, there are also regional options. The African Union may wish to gain accountability through the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, rather than at the International Criminal Court. Long-standing suspicions of the International Criminal Court by African nations might prevent the case to be passed to the International Criminal Court, and favour this option instead.⁸²⁵

There appears to be international recognition that food is being used within the conflict as a leverage to stamp out dissent, with commentators labelling it a "war of starvation".⁸²⁶ Starvation is in itself, a means to an end. It is a tactic to remove the TPLF and its sympathisers from the region, removing and destroying the threat to

⁸²⁰ For examples see: Reuters (2021) Anger in Somalia as sons secretly sent to serve in Eritrea military force, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-eritrea-security-idUSKBN29X1F5>; Nyssen (2021) Catastrophe stalks Tigray, again, Available at: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>; Associated Press (2021) In Somalia, Mothers Fear Sons Were Sent to Ethiopia Conflict, Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somalia-mothers-fear-sons-were-sent-ethiopia-conflict>; Mukami (2021) Somalia: Parents protest over missing recruits, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/somalia-parents-protest-over-missing-recruits/2116828>; African Military Blog (2020) Tigray: UAE Drones support Ethiopia, Available at: <https://eritrehub.org/tigray-uae-drones-supports-ethiopia>; Reuters (2020) In Escalation of Ethiopia War, Tigray Leader Says His Forces Fired Rockets at Eritrea, Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-drones-supporting-ethiopia-from-an-eritrean-air-base/>

⁸²¹ Rome Statute Of The International Criminal Court 8 (2) (B) (Xxv) "Intentionally Using Starvation Of Civilians As A Method Of Warfare By Depriving Them Of Objects Indispensable To Their Survival, Including Wilfully Impeding Relief Supplies As Provided For Under The Geneva Conventions.;" For more information see: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/nr/rdonlyres/add16852-ae9-4757-abe7-9cdc7cf02886/283503/romestatutengl.pdf>

⁸²² A power embedded in Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute.

⁸²³ de Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>; Lederer (2021) Diplomats: UN Fails To Approve Call To End Tigray Violence, Available At: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-violence-india-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-f93a9a6bc7c0845a37cf7e3e3757e1e7>.

⁸²⁴ REF

⁸²⁵ de Waal (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57226551>

⁸²⁶ De Waal (2021) The World Bank Should Not Fund Ethiopia's War In Tigray, The Financial Times, Available At: <https://eritrehub.org/the-world-bank-should-not-fund-ethiopias-war-in-tigray>.

the federal government, and its Eritrean and Amhara allies. The ongoing conflict in Tigray represents one of the first challenges for the United Nations Security Council on the thematic issue of 'Conflict and Hunger', in respect to resolution 2417. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417, signed in 2018, outlined the increased threat and association of conflict and hunger and called on all state parties to acknowledge and abide by existing international law on the matter.⁸²⁷ It also outlined the possible avenues the United Nations Security Council could take, such as sanctions, investigations into violations of international law, and accountability through domestic or international law.⁸²⁸ The resolution could have been written specifically for the Tigray crisis. It will be interesting to watch whether the resolution, which has not yet been implemented, is used in the context of Tigray. If it is not, then the international community should question the utility of the resolution in combatting the rising threat of conflict and hunger.

The international community is watching Tigray, with a rise in media attention and discussions at the United Nations Security Council. At the United Nations Security Council debate on Conflict and Hunger in March 2021, eleven of twenty State Representatives and speakers referred to the situation in Tigray and written statements directly referred to reports of "starvation being used as a weapon of war."⁸²⁹ However, the council could not agree on a statement to condemn the violence and immediate need for humanitarian assistance, following objections from India, Russia and China, who reinforced the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and its sovereign responsibility within its jurisdiction.⁸³⁰ Despite barriers to national and international accountability at the time of writing, fact-finding missions mandated by other national, regional and international bodies have begun. On the 25th March 2021, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) announced a joint investigation into the ongoing atrocities.⁸³¹ Following this the African Union also announced a Commission of Inquiry to investigate alleged violations of human rights.⁸³²

On 10 June a high-level EU-US roundtable was held, following the failure of the UNSC to reach a consensus and the declaration of famine by Mark Lowcock. It aimed to shed light on the deteriorating situation in Tigray. Members expressed their concerns about the lack of international action and funding, the impediments at

⁸²⁷ United Nations Security Council, S/RES/2417 (2018).

⁸²⁸ United Nations Security Council, S/RES/2417 (2018).

⁸²⁹ European Union (2021) EU Statement - United Nations Security Council: Open Debate on Conflict and Food Security, Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/94468/eu-statement-united-nations-security-council-open-debate-conflict-and-food-security_en

⁸³⁰ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll;> Lederer (2021) Diplomats: UN Fails To Approve Call To End Tigray Violence, Available At: [https://apnews.com/article/russia-violence-india-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-f93a9a6bc7c0845a37cf7e3e3757e1e7.](https://apnews.com/article/russia-violence-india-humanitarian-assistance-ethiopia-f93a9a6bc7c0845a37cf7e3e3757e1e7)

⁸³¹ Human Rights Watch (June 11, 2021) NGOs Call for UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Tigray, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/11/ngos-call-un-human-rights-council-resolution-tigray>; OHCHR (March 25 2021) Ethiopia: Joint investigation with a view to a credible accountability process, Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26949&LangID=E>

⁸³² African Union (June 16, 2021) Press Statement on the official launch of the Commission of inquiry in Tigray, Available at: <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20210616/press-statement-official-launch-commission-inquiry-tigray-region-federal>

the UNSC level, and the need to prevent a repeat of 1984. The provision of aid will not be enough to prevent mass starvation in Tigray. The roundtable provides recognition that humanitarian crises such as this, do require high-level political action. If the international community doesn't use its position to condemn the situation, or take action, this will represent a failure to live up to the rhetoric of the recent conflict and hunger debate and resolution 2417, potentially diminishing respect for existing international law.

"We can't put reliable numbers on the hunger, sickness and death in Tigray, but we know enough to be sure that an immense tragedy is unfolding." Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation ⁸³³

We are in an era where international human rights institutions are facing mounting criticisms for their ineffectiveness. For those who support a rules-based order, this is particularly worrying. The quest for peace and universal freedoms is at risk. This is pertinent in the context of Ethiopia. In 2019 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for improving Ethiopia's relationship with Eritrea.⁸³⁴ This new friendship between the Ethiopian and Eritrean administrations may have temporarily resolved old rivalries, yet it has arguably been done so at the expense of the TPLF and the wider Tigrayan ethnic group. Interestingly, the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize laureate was the World Food Programme, for their role in improving global food security, and their work on the prohibition of starvation as a weapon of war.⁸³⁵ The irony of these consecutive winners eats the soul.

The Undermining of Food Systems: Destruction of Food

One of the clearest attempts to damage food security and deprive civilians of the essentials for life, is through the deliberate destruction of food. Across Tigray, food stores have been pillaged and scorched earth tactics have been used by the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces.⁸³⁶ There have been a staggering number of reports that whole villages, warehouses, expanses of fields and crops, mango orchards and grain stores have been destroyed.⁸³⁷ With the destruction of mango orchards in Adeba and Tseada Sare appearing to have "[n]o rationale except hatred and destruction".⁸³⁸

⁸³³ Alex de Waal (2021) Viewpoint: From Ethiopia's Tigray region to Yemen, the dilemma of declaring a famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55879681>

⁸³⁴ The Nobel Prize, All Nobel Peace Prizes, Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-peace-prizes/>

⁸³⁵ The Nobel Prize, All Nobel Peace Prizes, Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-peace-prizes/>

⁸³⁶ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁸³⁷ FIRIS Fire Alert, Twitter Post, January 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/firis_firealert/status/1350302487199158274?s=20; Reuters Staff, 'Hundreds Of Buildings Burned Around Tigray Town, Research Group Says,' Reuters, February 25, 2021;; 'Ethiopia: 'Hundreds Executed' In Tigray,' Sky News, Youtube, March 16, 2021.; De Waal (2021) 'The Mango Orchards Of Zamra, Tigray,' World Peace Foundation, March 3, 2021, Available at:

[https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/.](https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/)

⁸³⁸ Nyssen 2020 Cluster Bombing On Tigray By The Ethiopian Army - More Than 500 Homesteads Destroyed In Gijet. Paper https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349669904_cluster_bombing_on_tigray_by_the_ethiopian_army_more_than_500_homesteads_destroyed_in_gijet; De Waal (2021) 'The Mango Orchards Of Zamra, Tigray,' World Peace Foundation, March 3, 2021, Available at: [https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/.](https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/)

A number of news outlets, including Sky and the Economist, have spoken to witnesses on the ground who described the repeated scenes of destruction. One farmer told Oxfam that he had lost 10 months of food supplies to systematic scorched earth tactics.⁸³⁹ Satellite imagery shows that this destruction first seen in November 2020 has carried on through to March 2021, with little of Tigray escaping the smoky chaos.⁸⁴⁰ Across the region, open-source satellite imagery, fire tracking data from NASA fire information and resource management system (FIRMS), fires in settlement (FIRIS) and US Government internal reporting, show that the Eritrean and Ethiopian militaries are burning whatever they cannot carry;⁸⁴¹ leaving behind a scorched wasteland in their fiery wake. This information was corroborated by news reports from the ground.⁸⁴² These cruel strategies not only destroy the unharvested crops, but limit the ability to grow crops during the following harvest period as the soil's nutrients are burnt away. This act leaves many households unable to sustain themselves, particularly those who are reliant on farming as their primary source of food. Scorched earth tactics are prohibited in international law because of the collateral damage they cause, which disproportionately effects civilians.⁸⁴³ Fires set off by Eritrean and Ethiopian ground forces and aerial bombardment have left many areas desolated, food is destroyed, and the land's capabilities to grow food in the future are burnt away, leaving behind a barren waste land.

⁸³⁹ The Economist (2021) Soldiers Have Killed Hundreds Of Civilians In Tigray, Available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/02/27/soldiers-have-killed-hundreds-of-civilians-in-tigray>; De Waal (2021) 'The Mango Orchards Of Zamra, Tigray,' World Peace Foundation, March 3, 2021, Available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/>; Oxfam (2021) Conflict Compounded By Covid-19 And Climate Change Pushes Millions In Tigray To The Brink, Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/fr/node/15553>; Reuters Staff (2021) Hundreds Of Buildings Burned Around Tigray Town, Research Group Says, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-fires-idUSKBN2AP196>; Sky (2021) 'Ethiopia: 'Hundreds Executed' In Tigray,' Youtube, March 16, 2021, Available at: <https://news.sky.com/video/ethiopia-hundreds-executed-in-tigray-12249216>.

⁸⁴⁰ Jan Nyssen, 'Late 2020 Personal Diary Of The War On Tigray,' Ghent University, January, 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348356294>; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁴¹ World Peace Foundation Report; Ryan O'Farrell, Twitter Post, November 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ryanmofarrell/status/1326398149460709378>; 'FIRMS FAQ,' NASA FIRMS, Last Modified February 22, 2021, <https://earthdata.nasa.gov/faq/firms-faq#ed-user-guides>.

⁸⁴² World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁴³ a number of articles within the Geneva conventions prohibit the destruction of food including through scorched earth tactics, which intend to deprive the civilian population of food: Geneva Convention Protocol I, Article 35 (3) "it is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment." Article 51(4) (b)-(c): attacks which "employ a method or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective; or attacks which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by the protocol and which consequently are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction"; Geneva Convention Protocol I, Article 54 (2) "it is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, for the specific purpose of denying them for their sustenance value to the civilian population or to the adverse party, whatever the motive, whether in order to starve out civilians, to cause them to move away, or for any other motive."; Geneva Convention Protocol I, Article 54 (3) (B) indicates that should actions be taken against armed forces, it should not "leave the civilian population with such inadequate food or water as to cause its starvation or force its movement."; Geneva Convention Protocol I, Article 55 (1) "care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage. This protection includes a prohibition of the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby to prejudice the health or survival of the population."; Geneva Convention Protocol II, Article 14 "starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works."

"I'm afraid that the campaign in Tigray is at best a scorched earth policy and at worst it is genocidal in terms of tactics and intentions" Matt Bryden, a political analyst based in Nairobi, former roles with UN, and the Horn of Africa International Crisis Group⁸⁴⁴

The slaughtering of animals, from oxen to chickens has been reported.⁸⁴⁵ One eyewitness recalled a merciless scene where "an Eritrean soldier crushed baby chicks under his foot."⁸⁴⁶ For the lucky individuals whose livestock has escaped this inhumane treatment, finding enough food for the livestock poses another major challenge.⁸⁴⁷ Farmers have expressed their torment following their encounters with Eritrean Soldiers. In one report, survivors of attacks told Vice News that *"Farmers were forced by Eritrean soldiers to slaughter their cows and prepare food for the soldiers. They later doused the homes of these same farmers in gasoline."*⁸⁴⁸

Unfortunately, reports of farmers being threatened are ubiquitous. Farmers are reporting threats such as: "You won't plough, you won't harvest, and if you try, we will punish you."⁸⁴⁹ This malicious intent and destruction of food provides evidence that starvation is being used as a weapon of war. Many farmers have abandoned their lands, as the lack of oxen, seeds or fertiliser has shattered their hopes to grow during the next season. The more daring, or desperate farmers have resorted to ploughing at night to avoid detection.

The Undermining of Food Systems: Looting and Pillage

As well as destroying available food supplies and the ability to grow food, looting and pillaging have left Tigrayans without the means to make or buy food. Despite international laws prohibiting these acts,⁸⁵⁰ it's clear that no place is off limits to the looters, with hospitals, hotels, houses, churches, universities, refugee camps and

⁸⁴⁴ Sidley (2021) Ethiopia's Hidden War, The International Bar Association, Available at:

<https://www.ibanet.org/article/newdetail.aspx?articleid=7e96c4dd-a463-4a65-8610-f1ab30a59a8b>

⁸⁴⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpff/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁴⁶ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>; Nyssen, 'Late 2020 Personal Diary Of The War On Tigray,' Ghent University, January, 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348356294>

⁸⁴⁷ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update

Situation Report, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁸⁴⁸ Zelalem (2021) "They Started Burning the Homes": Ethiopians Say Their Towns Are Being Razed in Ethnic Cleansing Campaign, Vice News, Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7vgex/they-started-burning-the-homes-ethiopians-say-their-towns-are-being-razed-in-ethnic-cleansing-campaign>.

⁸⁴⁹ Alex de Waal (2021) Ethiopia Tigray Crisis: Warnings of genocide and famine, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57226551>

⁸⁵⁰ For Example: Rome Statue Of The International Criminal Court, Article 8 (2) (E) (V) prohibits "pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault"; geneva convention (IV) Article 33 "pillage is prohibited"; Geneva Convention Additional Protocol II Article 4 (2) "without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, the following acts against the persons referred to in paragraph 1 are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever:" (g) "pillage".

shops raided across the region.⁸⁵¹ Forced displacement caused by the conflict has also provided opportunities for the Eritrean forces to loot houses and shops of anything left behind.⁸⁵² In Adigrat, Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) reported that even the hospital ambulances had been stolen.⁸⁵³ Similarly in Amhara occupied Western Tigray, hospitals have been looted of medical supplies and generators, while harvests, water tanks and pumps and clothes have been looted.⁸⁵⁴ Even the storage facilities at refugee camps have been targeted by looters, according to the World Food Programme.⁸⁵⁵

Accounts suggest that the Ethiopian military has been responsible for the looting of banks and the regional government's assets, while Eritrean forces have taken personal possessions through house-to-house and village wide raids.⁸⁵⁶ This pattern of looting and destruction has impacted the mining and manufacturing industries across Tigray. Almost one quarter of manufacturing jobs in the region have already been lost to the conflict, leaving more than 47,000 people in urban areas without their primary income stream.⁸⁵⁷ The EFFORT manufacturing conglomerate has been subject to the looting of premises and financial attacks. In November, EFFORT's bank account, and its 34 subsidiaries were frozen, before the Federal government dissolved EFFORT, moving its assets to Federal companies. The conglomerate provided a substantial income stream for the Tigrayan regional government indicating that this is an attack on the financial stability of the TPLF. Nonetheless the loss of jobs has meant an estimated 76,000 people in urban Tigray have been left unsupported financially. By removing these funds, the Federal Government has removed necessary access to food for these families.⁸⁵⁸

"[T]hey literally destroyed the wealth we accumulated for thirty years in Tigray" Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, Senior Fellow at the World Peace Foundation & TPLF member

⁸⁵¹ Human Rights Watch (2021) Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians, Available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>; Amnesty International (2021) The Massacre in Axum, Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/3730/2021/en/>.

⁸⁵² World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>.

⁸⁵³ Reuters (2021) Ethiopians dying, hungry and fearful in war-hit Tigray: agencies, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-iduskbn29p0x1>.

⁸⁵⁴ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>.

⁸⁵⁵ Anna (2021) Extreme urgent need: Starvation haunts Ethiopia's Tigray, Associated Press, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-ef0b6b2db2994d4c3042cf19f3d92a2a>.

⁸⁵⁶ Anna (2021) Witnesses: Eritrean Soldiers Loot, Kill In Ethiopia's Tigray, Associated Press, Available at: [https://apnews.com/article/tigray-ethiopia-news-2bdd10888f7717690847ad117f09f2d4#:~:text=NAIROBI%2C%20Kenya%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94,pockets%20clinked%20with%20stolen%20jewelry.&text=Heartbreakingly%20worse%2C%20she%20said%2C%20Eritrean,didn't%20allow%20their%20burials](https://apnews.com/article/tigray-ethiopia-news-2bdd10888f7717690847ad117f09f2d4#:~:text=NAIROBI%2C%20Kenya%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94,pockets%20clinked%20with%20stolen%20jewelry.&text=Heartbreakingly%20worse%2C%20she%20said%2C%20Eritrean,didn't%20allow%20their%20burials). OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, February 28, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-28-february-2021>.

⁸⁵⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>.

⁸⁵⁸ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>.

In January 2021, it was reported that a wide range of shops in Mekelle, which previously sold anything from hardware to clothing had converted to grocery stores, as food had become the most lucrative good.⁸⁵⁹ However, markets have been badly affected by the conflict. The high risk of violent raids, looting of goods, and the disruption of trade has resulted in food shortages and elevated food prices.⁸⁶⁰ As such, in some Woredas, the limited available food is extremely expensive.⁸⁶¹ By February, with conflict intensive areas in the Eastern and Central zones impacted the worst,⁸⁶² the destruction of harvests and the instability of markets was contributing to a significant rise in hunger across Tigray.⁸⁶³ Even for the lucky ones who do have access to grain, the destruction of mills, limited electricity and shortage of matches means that in many areas, this grain cannot even be processed.⁸⁶⁴ Local aid organisations adapted their response by organising flour deliveries, rather than grains, in Adigrat and Irob. But this response was not regional.⁸⁶⁵ Eyewitness accounts and interviews reveal that people have had to resort to eating raw grain or the leaves off bushes and branches.⁸⁶⁶ In one interview, a woman described how she had drunk water from a hole she had dug in the ground, after the water infrastructure had been damaged.⁸⁶⁷

In February, during a phone call from a remote hillside cave where he was seeking refuge, Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, a Senior Fellow at the World Peace Foundation and TPLF member, told Alex de Waal about the events he had witnessed across Tigray. He recalled scenes of killings, looting, pillaging and the widespread burning of crops that were ready to be harvested.

“They have started looting the produce of the peasants, from all the villages beyond the black road that crosses Tigray towards Eritrea. And they kill whomever they find in whichever village they get in.” Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, Senior Fellow at the World Peace Foundation & TPLF member.

⁸⁵⁹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁶⁰ Chatham House Webinar (2021) Responding To The Humanitarian Situation In Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Available At: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/responding-humanitarian-situation-ethiopia-tigray-region>

⁸⁶¹ Anna (2021) Extreme urgent need: Starvation haunts Ethiopia's Tigray, Associated Press, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-ef0b6b2db2994d4c3042cf19f3d92a2a>

⁸⁶² OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/situation%20report%20-%20ethiopia%20-%20tigray%20region%20humanitarian%20update%20-%204%20feb%202021.pdf>

⁸⁶³ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/situation%20report%20-%20ethiopia%20-%20tigray%20region%20humanitarian%20update%20-%204%20feb%202021.pdf>

⁸⁶⁴ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe Stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>.

Anny, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁸⁶⁵ Tesfay (2021) Deux transports supplémentaires par camions financés par Tesfay ont pu apporter 116 000 kilos de farine de blé à Adigrat, Available at: <http://tesfayblog.blogspot.com/>.

⁸⁶⁶ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe Stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>.

⁸⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch (2021) Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>.

Fear permeates through the eyewitness accounts on the ground. The Non-Governmental Organisation Mary's Meals, which had been providing school lunches to children in Tigray before conflict began, made contact with the Nun who coordinates their operations in Tigray.⁸⁶⁸ She told them of the collective pain and suffering Tigrayans are facing. She herself recently having lost several family members. The schools she worked with are no longer providing education but are overcrowded with the internally displaced. These sites, however, are still not safe from looters:

"Some of them were telling me that at night, sometimes they are looted, people come in with knives and dangerous things, to take away whatever they get – like it could be food portions, it could be clothes they get. There are young people that come from outside drunk, and take away what they get also, so they are not safe." Nun (remains anonymous for her safety)⁸⁶⁹

By mid-March, OCHA revealed that the agricultural systems had been shattered, a result of fighting, looting and destruction. The state of food security had reached catastrophe, and the desperation of farmers was mounting.⁸⁷⁰ For those who have been lucky enough to receive food aid, the risk of it being looted is high. Interviews with families in the region indicate the desperate measures which are being taken to keep the received aid safe, including burying the aid to avoid looters finding it. By June, humanitarians operating on the ground reported a worrying trend: whole villages along the main roads were looted and deserted. There was nothing and no one left.⁸⁷¹

The Undermining of Food Systems: Banking and Payments

The modern banking systems which had contributed to the improved freedom, security and development throughout Tigray, now restrict survival, becoming an additional noose for its people. In the past, households would protect their wealth by buying more livestock or land, improving their agricultural output. The rise of microfinance and banking allowed Tigrayans to store their wealth in banks instead. By October 2020, more than 400,000 people in Tigray had savings in the banking system amounting to over \$100 million.⁸⁷² Banks have since been looted and records destroyed or frozen.⁸⁷³ As such, this conflict has resulted in hundreds of thousands of people losing the money that they had earned, saved and entrusted to the banking system and with no way to prove their loss. Arguably the traditional mechanisms

⁸⁶⁸Mary's Meals (2021) Crisis in Ethiopia: behind the blackout in Tigray, Available at:

<https://www.marysmealsusa.org/en/who-we-are/news-and-blogs/crisis-in-ethiopia-behind-the-blackout-in-tigray>.

⁸⁶⁹ Mary's Meals (2021) Crisis in Ethiopia: behind the blackout in Tigray, Available at:

<https://www.marysmealsusa.org/en/who-we-are/news-and-blogs/crisis-in-ethiopia-behind-the-blackout-in-tigray>.

⁸⁷⁰OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report, March, Available at:

https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/?fbclid=IwAR1ois5khij55thfshf_4wy4e7wloqfxjztisa0yv6y93_auf38ztscil3e

⁸⁷¹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report, June, Available at:

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20-](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20Situation%20Report%2C%2010%20June%202021.pdf)

[%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20Situation%20Report%2C%2010%20June%202021.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20Situation%20Report%2C%2010%20June%202021.pdf)

⁸⁷² Peter Mackie Et AL, 'Microfinance And Poverty Alleviation In Ethiopia,' Cardiff School Of Geography And Planning, 2015,

https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/581509/ethiopia-report-jun-2015-final.pdf.

⁸⁷³ Plaut (2021) Tigray on the edge of famine: 50 to 100 a day starve as crisis intensifies, Available at:

<https://eritreahub.org/tigray-on-the-edge-of-famine-50-to-100-a-day-starve-as-crisis-intensifies>.; World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>;

for saving might not have provided a greater level of security given the destruction of land, food and the slaughtering of livestock. But the modern banking systems across Tigray, have provided yet another vulnerability to economic attack. The cash shortages coupled with an increase in food prices has led to food being outpriced for many Tigrayans.⁸⁷⁴ By June, banking services had resumed in several towns, however disruptions in services remained common. Accessing bank notes has continued to be difficult, with people walking miles, then queueing for hours or even days to retrieve cash.⁸⁷⁵

In November 2020, as tensions between the federal and regional governments increased, the federal government withheld the nationally organised PSNP (safety-net payments) which supported one million people in Tigray. The PSNP has been a lifeline for many in the rural economy, the most vulnerable people across Tigray being dependent on these payments,⁸⁷⁶ and its removal has exposed an estimated 18% of the Tigrayan population to immediate and life-threatening food insecurity.⁸⁷⁷ In March 2021, the PSNP payments hadn't yet resumed, whilst many woredas had seen no humanitarian aid, labour opportunities disrupted and wages frozen.⁸⁷⁸ By June, it remained unclear how many of the PSNP beneficiaries were amongst those receiving aid, indicating that many of the most vulnerable could be facing extreme food insecurity. By removing the means to buy food and denying access to the safety net system which had improved food security in Tigray, the options for many have become extremely limited.

The Undermining of Food Systems: Displacement and Immobility

The conflict has caused mass displacement within Tigray and by December 2020 over 62,000 people had fled across the border into neighbouring Sudan.⁸⁷⁹ Displacement has a huge impact on immediate and long-term food security, as people move away from their lands, often taking only what they can carry. In Tigray, the September-January harvest was disrupted by conflict limiting existing food supplies, while little aid reached those displaced. Mass displacement throughout Tigray has complicated this further, as it means that the next harvest may also be disrupted. Without fertile land to cultivate or grain to sow, when the

⁸⁷⁴ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁸⁷⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

⁸⁷⁶ Deckers, S., Nyssen, J., Lanckriet, S., 2020. Ethiopia's Tigray Region Has Seen Famine Before: Why It Could Happen Again. The Conversation, 17/11/2020, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-tigray-region-has-seenfamine-before-why-it-could-happen-again-150181>.

⁸⁷⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁷⁸ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁸⁷⁹ Chatham House Webinar (2021) Responding To The Humanitarian Situation In Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Available At: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/responding-humanitarian-situation-ethiopias-tigray-region>

next rainy season comes in June, it is unclear if there will be anything growing in the fields. For those who have been repeatedly displaced by the fighting, the ability to grow their own food in the upcoming agricultural season looks bleak.

Internal displacement

Just five months after the conflict began, UNHCR stated that over 2 million people had become internally displaced (IDPs) and over 1,000 people were arriving in Shire daily, mainly from Western Tigray.⁸⁸⁰ The real number of IDPs in Tigray may be far higher than the speculations, as people have moved from rural areas where conflict is ongoing to reside with family members in large towns, or are taking refuge in remote areas, such as caves hidden amongst the rugged landscape.⁸⁸¹ Farmers in these locations expressed their hopes that rather than travel to big cities for refuge, they would wait out the fighting close enough to their land, enabling them to return in time to sow their fields ahead of the next rainy season.⁸⁸² Despite these remote locations having potentially protected their families from the conflict, they are not sheltered, however, from the dangers of food insecurity. The majority of these areas are accessible only by 'rural access roads', community-maintained road systems which link Tabiyas with the main roads. Many of these are walking paths with space for donkeys, not aid convoys.⁸⁸³ In March it was believed that over one million people who were in need of assistance had been displaced into inaccessible locations.⁸⁸⁴ This being said, by April the little food aid that made its way into Tigray was not reaching further than the cities, towns and a handful of villages.⁸⁸⁵

The situation for those who make it to IDP camps within Ethiopia is also meagre. Schools and universities have been repurposed as shelters,⁸⁸⁶ and the risk of contagious diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia are high.⁸⁸⁷ By January, Aksum University Shire Campus housed more than 40,000 people, many of whom required urgent medical attention.⁸⁸⁸ Another 40,000 people were residing across the Shire Preparatory School and the Primary School. With limited medical and food supplies, these camps do not provide much comfort in these times of

⁸⁸⁰ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁸⁸¹ Reuters (2021) Over 2 million people displaced by conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region - local official, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN29B1N7>.

⁸⁸² De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>.

⁸⁸³ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁸⁸⁴ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁸⁸⁵ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁸⁸⁶ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁸⁸⁷ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁸⁸⁸ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

need.⁸⁸⁹ For the IDPs who are not registered, the situation is worse, as they may face barriers to accessing food assistance and other forms of security. OCHA and UNICEF visited IDP camps in Axum and Adwa during May, which housed more than 360,000 IDPs. The sites had received just one food aid delivery since the conflict began in November. The situation is desperate; the majority of people now living in these camps have not received any food aid.⁸⁹⁰

Before fighting began, Tigray was home to 96,000 Eritrean refugees living across a number of camps. Regrettably, refugee camps within Tigray have been targeted, destroyed, and vandalised by militia.⁸⁹¹ Additionally, government restrictions on humanitarian access has disrupted deliveries of food and clean water, leaving many people desperate. According to a UNHCR spokesman, Eritrean refugees in Tigray have resorted to drinking from muddy puddles and eating plants, tree bark and leaves.⁸⁹² The camps which remain functioning are overcapacity and under-resourced. Between November 2020 and June 2021, food insecurity for those displaced in Tigray deteriorated at an alarming rate.

Cross-border displacement

The conflict has caused immense social dislocation; people are fleeing fighting in one area, to find violence in another. For some the journey across the border to Sudan seemed like the only option. However, the route to safety in Sudan is fraught with danger. Alem Mebrahtu, a 30-year-old refugee recalled how the Tekeze riverbed separating Sudan with Tigray was littered with around 50 bodies: “*Some were face-down. Some were looking up at the sky*”.⁸⁹³ This story has been repeated by many who are taking refuge in camps in Sudan, having safely made it across the river without drowning or being shot by patrolling Eritrean or Ethiopian forces. Since December this route has become even more dangerous as the Ethiopian-Sudanese border was closed, while testimonies from families in Sudan say that Ethiopian soldiers are preventing their loved ones from leaving.⁸⁹⁴ The camps in Sudan are struggling to keep up with the demand for food aid, and even in November the supplies in local markets had all but run out.⁸⁹⁵ Salah Ramadan, the head of the Sudanese Border

⁸⁸⁹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁸⁹⁰ OCHA (28 May 2021) Ethiopia, Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202020%20May%202021.pdf>

⁸⁹¹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁸⁹² BBC (2021) Tigray crisis: Ethiopia region at risk of huge 'humanitarian disaster', Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55905108>.

⁸⁹³ Anna (2021) Leave no Tigrayan: In Ethiopia, an ethnicity is erased, Associated Press, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tigray-minority-ethnic-cleansing-sudan-world-news-842741eebf9bf0984946619c0fc15023>

⁸⁹⁴ Soy (2020) Tigray crisis: Ethiopian soldiers accused of blocking border with Sudan, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55106353>

⁸⁹⁵ Aljazeera (2020) In Pictures: Ethiopians fleeing war cross river into Sudan, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/11/15/in-pictures-ethiopians-fleeing>.

town's administration told reporters of the struggles they faced: *"People are hungry and the flow of refugees is continuing but we have little to offer"*.⁸⁹⁶

The camps were ill-prepared for the influx of refugees with unsanitary conditions, and limited shelters and food supplies being reported. By February Médecins Sans Frontiers claimed that hunger was widespread.⁸⁹⁷ Although porridge and lentils are served every day, the small portions often run out before everyone has eaten, and many families had only just received their first food parcels, with a lack of clarity over when the next ones would arrive.⁸⁹⁸

"Every day they tell us the food is coming and every day it does not come." Maryam, Tigrayan Refugee in Sudan

Displacement and Immobility

As well as displacement, immobility through the implementation of military checkpoints and travel permits has restricted the freedom of movement. As aforementioned, the ability to move for work has sustained households across Tigray over the past few decades, with jobs in manufacturing and sesame production providing an additional income stream for many families. However, moving around Tigray is dangerous and passing through checkpoints increases vulnerability to harassment, mugging or even extrajudicial execution.⁸⁹⁹ Without this movement, households are more vulnerable to food insecurity as they face a reduction in household purchasing power.

In western Tigray, rather than welcoming an influx of seasonal workers to help with the sesame harvest, the 140,000 people who inhabit the Woredas have been forcibly removed from their land and homes by Amhara militia.⁹⁰⁰ In an area that has seen such progress over the previous decades, the lives of many Western Tigrayans have been majorly impacted by widespread destruction, death and displacement. This information has been corroborated by the arrival of Western Tigrayans in refugee camps in Sudan and urban areas in East Tigray.⁹⁰¹ The Amhara forces state that they have an ancestral claim to the land, which was taken from them during the decades when the TPLF dominated the Ethiopian Government.⁹⁰² The land is of high

⁸⁹⁶ Aljazeera (2020) In Pictures: Ethiopians fleeing war cross river into Sudan, available at:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/11/15/in-pictures-ethiopians-fleeing>.

⁸⁹⁷ Doctors without Borders (2021) Sudan: Refugees from Tigray Face Hunger and Inadequate shelter in Hamdayet, available at: <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/sudan-refugees-tigray-face-hunger-and-inadequate-shelter-hamdayet>

⁸⁹⁸ Doctors without Borders (2021) Sudan: Refugees from Tigray Face Hunger and Inadequate shelter in Hamdayet, available at: <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/sudan-refugees-tigray-face-hunger-and-inadequate-shelter-hamdayet>

⁸⁹⁹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁹⁰⁰ OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁹⁰¹ Anna (2021) 'People are starving': New exodus in Ethiopia's Tigray area, Associated Press, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/world-news-ethiopia-a25a50a774da284122c74a0bc1428052>

⁹⁰² Reuters (2021) 'You don't belong': land dispute drives new exodus in Ethiopia's Tigray, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-displaced-insight-int-iduskbn2bl1c3>

economic value due to its fertility,⁹⁰³ making it suitable for sesame production. More than 200,000 people are employed each year by the sesame industry, representing the most lucrative employment for seasonal workers in Tigray. The disruption to which will greatly dampen the food security of many households.

In February, a US report leaked in the New York Times, provided a damning insight into the situation on the ground, claiming that the Amhara and Ethiopian forces were “*deliberately and efficiently rendering Western Tigray ethnically homogeneous through the organized use of force and intimidation*” and that “*Whole villages were severely damaged or completely erased*”.⁹⁰⁴ The World Peace Foundation confirmed these accounts using Google Earth imagery, demonstrating the “*comprehensive nature of the scorched earth policy of various Amhara forces*”.⁹⁰⁵ In March, Secretary of State for the United States, Anthony Blinken, used the phrase “*ethnic cleansing*” to describe the situation in Western Tigray.⁹⁰⁶ Accounts from witnesses on the ground verify this, indicating that those who identified as Tigrayan were expelled, raped or killed by Amhara militia, while many people remain unaccounted for.⁹⁰⁷ One witness noted their beliefs that in Amhara, mothers “hope that their son will get a piece of land in western Tigray”.⁹⁰⁸ Reports suggest that by March, shops, hotels, homes, offices and businesses had been taken over by Amhara authorities. The western Tigrayans pushed out, wealth looted, their livelihoods on the brink as a result.⁹⁰⁹ The Amhara forces responded to these allegations stating that they were in Amhara, not Tigray,⁹¹⁰ providing further evidence that there was an agenda to recapture the profitable lands of Western Tigray, which they viewed as their own.

The implications of the conflict on the sesame and manufacturing (through looting) industries will be devastating for food security. These industries account for up to 1/3 of Tigrayans’ income streams.⁹¹¹ With income decreasing, and food prices

⁹⁰³ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; Walsh (2021) Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>; OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁹⁰⁴ Walsh (2021) Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>.

⁹⁰⁵ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>; OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁹⁰⁶ Reuters (2021) Ethiopia rejects U.S. allegations of ethnic cleansing in Tigray, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2B50ES>

⁹⁰⁷ Walsh (2021) Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>.

⁹⁰⁸ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe Stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>.

⁹⁰⁹ Walsh (2021) Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/middleeast/ethiopia-tigray-ethnic-cleansing.html>.

⁹¹⁰ Reuters (2021) Ethiopia rejects U.S. allegations of ethnic cleansing in Tigray, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN2B50ES>

⁹¹¹ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region’s Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

increasing, with no hope of growing food due to the scorched earth tactics, it will be a huge challenge for many to access enough nutritional food to survive. The longer this conflict continues, the harder it will be recovering the food security in the region.

Obstruction of Humanitarian Access and Assistance

"The fear is that the combination of an informational black hole and the systematic and deliberate dismantling of a food economy means that best-practice food security assessment and forecasting is likely only to diagnose a famine when it is too late." The World Peace Foundation⁹¹²

Access – information and the humanitarian response

Under international humanitarian law, it is essential that civilians in conflicts are given adequate protections, including the ability to receive humanitarian assistance.⁹¹³ However, since the conflict began humanitarian access has been disrupted, obstructed and restricted. The communications blackout, compounded by constraints on physical access have meant that the sheer extent of the human rights violations across Tigray is not yet known.⁹¹⁴ Reports could reflect just the 'tip of the iceberg'.⁹¹⁵ It is clear that the Ethiopian government is trying to prevent information leaving Tigray. Journalists have been targeted, arrested, deported, or killed, while translators and fixers have been intimidated.⁹¹⁶ Many people have been separated from their loved ones, and without communications systems in place, they have no idea if their families are still alive.

Ethiopia's Director of Action Against Hunger Panos Navrozidis referred to Tigray as a "black hole", as with limited access via communication channels and the majority of the region off limits to aid agencies, the extent of food insecurity on the ground was unclear.⁹¹⁷ The communications embargo within the region has certainly complicated the aid effort. In many cases, humanitarian staff had been unreachable for months, due to the lack of phone or internet services, which had been down

⁹¹² World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁹¹³ For Example, protection of civilians is provided within: The Geneva Conventions And Its Protocols.; The Rome Statute Of The International Criminal Court.

⁹¹⁴ Nyssen 2020 Cluster Bombing On Tigray By The Ethiopian Army - More Than 500 Homesteads Destroyed In Gijet. Paper https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349669904_cluster_bombing_on_tigray_by_the_ethiopian_army_-_more_than_500_homesteads_destroyed_in_gijet; De Waal (2021) 'The Mango Orchards Of Zamra, Tigray,' World Peace Foundation, March 3, 2021, Available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/03/03/the-mango-orchards-of-zamra-tigray/>.

⁹¹⁵ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe Stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>; Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁹¹⁶ De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>.

⁹¹⁷ Reuters (2021) Ethiopians dying, hungry and fearful in war-hit Tigray: agencies, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-iduskbn29p0x1>

intermittently since November.⁹¹⁸ This made predicting the extent of food insecurity and the level of assistance required extremely hard for aid organisations. In November Catherine Sozi, the United Nations resident coordinator in Ethiopia told reporters about the conditions: “[t]he telecommunications are down, road access is closed, and fuel, water and cash in particular for our remaining staff and civilians to buy food wherever they may be is cut off.”⁹¹⁹ From November till January, supply routes for food and humanitarian aid had been cut off almost entirely.⁹²⁰ Activities such as the nutritional support programmes run by the World Food Programme, which had been in operation prior to the outbreak of the conflict, providing essential support to families whose nutritional intake was already dangerously low, had to be put on hold.⁹²¹

There were repeated calls for a humanitarian corridor to allow aid supplies into the region, culminating in an agreement between the UN and the Ethiopian Government at the beginning of December.⁹²² Despite this, there was little evidence of it coming into effect till January, a result of bureaucratic hold ups.⁹²³ The United Nations, facilitated by the World Food Programme, was given permission to deliver three aid convoys to two refugee camps and Mekelle in December.⁹²⁴ One of the UN Convoys providing supplies was shot at by militia and access to the camp was denied.⁹²⁵ This instance demonstrated the fragile nature of the conflict and the dangers of providing life-saving relief in an active conflict zone where there is a disregard for international law.⁹²⁶ Most humanitarian agencies, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontiers and Oxfam, were only given permission to access the region in early January, more than two months after the conflict began. Once the bureaucratic barriers were overcome, the organisations were granted restricted access to main roads and towns in areas free from ongoing fighting.⁹²⁷ Given the large rural population and growing food insecurity, this was an immediate concern for humanitarian agencies.

In January UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters that *“Humanitarian assistance continues to be constrained by the lack of full, and safe, unhindered access to*

⁹¹⁸ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia: Country Snapshot, Tigray Region, January, Available at:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_210120_snapshot_tigray02.pdf

⁹¹⁹ Marks and Nagourney (2020) As Fighting Rages in Ethiopia, Aid Groups Plead for Access to Refugees, The New York Times, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-refugees.html>

⁹²⁰ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia: Country Snapshot, Tigray Region, January, Available at:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_210120_snapshot_tigray02.pdf

⁹²¹ World Food Programme (2020) Ethiopia Country Brief, December, Available at: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/wfp-0000124303/download/?_ga=2.122660299.1162474238.1617207994-39341303.1614785908

⁹²² Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹²³ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹²⁴ World Food Programme (2020) Ethiopia Country Brief, December, Available at: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/wfp-0000124303/download/?_ga=2.122660299.1162474238.1617207994-39341303.1614785908

⁹²⁵ Reuters (2020) U.N. security team blocked, shot at near Ethiopian refugee camp, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-refugees-idukbkn28h1a1>.

⁹²⁶ Humanitarian actors are protected within The Geneva Convention and its Protocols.

⁹²⁷ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

Tigray, caused by both insecurity and bureaucratic delays".⁹²⁸ He went further to state that "Aid workers have been able to deliver assistance in some areas, mainly in cities, where access has been granted by the authorities. However, the number of people reached is extremely low compared to the 2.3 million people we estimate are in need of life-saving assistance".⁹²⁹ These fears were mirrored by Albert Vinas, the Emergency Coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontiers in Ethiopia, who said: "we are very concerned about what may be happening in rural areas".⁹³⁰ Ongoing clashes and lack of permissions had meant that the majority of Tigray was off limits to the agency, however reports were reaching them of the grave situation faced in these locations: "community elders and traditional authorities have told us, that the situation in these places is very bad".⁹³¹ When the agency did reach new towns, the situation was already desperate.

Despite attempts to limit the information leaving Tigray, reports of soaring malnutrition were reaching the United Nations. By mid-January, UNICEF had set up emergency clinics in Shire and reported that the leading cause of death was starvation.⁹³² However, by the end of the month, the Ethiopian Red Cross raised its concerns that 80% of the region was still not receiving aid.⁹³³ These concerns were mirrored in leaked minutes from the Tigray Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) which stated that they were "not able to reach 99% of the people in need".⁹³⁴ Nonetheless, according to the UN Chief for OCHA, aid was available in January. Mark Lowcock told reporters that there was "450 tonnes of supplies [that] we've been trying to get in that are stuck."⁹³⁵ Painfully slow bureaucratic processes for approving access, tight restrictions on permitted locations for aid operations, stringent permit checking at various sites within Tigray by the different actors, and limited numbers of UN personnel permitted on the ground, has obstructed aid from reaching those starving within Tigray. In an update, the UN revealed the struggles faced by the various agencies trying to provide relief assistance in Tigray, as "the 'rules of the game' change on a day-by-day basis", paralysing the aid effort.⁹³⁶ Repeated calls by various international organisations, humanitarian agencies and states have reaffirmed the need for "unhindered", "unimpeded" and "unfettered" access to those in need of assistance.⁹³⁷ By February, three different diplomatic negotiations

⁹²⁸ The United Nations (2021) Insecurity and bureaucracy hampering aid to Ethiopia's Tigray region, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082052>.

⁹²⁹ The United Nations (2021) Insecurity and bureaucracy hampering aid to Ethiopia's Tigray region, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082052>.

⁹³⁰ Anna (2021) Ethiopia says Tigray back to normal after conflict but witnesses disagree, The Independent, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-biden-b1795367.html>.

⁹³¹ Anna (2021) Ethiopia says Tigray back to normal after conflict but witnesses disagree, The Independent, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-biden-b1795367.html>.

⁹³² Reuters (2021) Ethiopians dying, hungry and fearful in war-hit Tigray: agencies, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-iduskbn29p0x1>

⁹³³ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/>.

⁹³⁴ Negash (2021) Tigray crisis: An account of January 2021, TGHAT, Available at: <https://www.tghat.com/2021/02/11/tigray-crisis-an-account-of-january-2021/>.

⁹³⁵ The Economist (2021) Ethiopia's government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon, available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/01/23/ethiopias-government-appears-to-be-wielding-hunger-as-a-weapon>

⁹³⁶ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹³⁷ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

led by the United Nations had been signed with the Ethiopian Government. However, the agreed upon unhindered access, personnel and cargo clearances, and six-month blanket travel permissions for UN agencies and NGOs, sadly have come to little effect.⁹³⁸

On 8 February, two of the major Tigrayan humanitarian organisations, Tigray Development Associated (TDA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) were taken over by the Federal Government.⁹³⁹ The takeover of REST is symbolic. REST played a substantial role in overcoming famine in the 1980s and has helped to build resilience in the region ever since. REST's mission was to prevent famines in the region through capacity building, the procurement of international funding and its distribution to those in need.⁹⁴⁰ Despite this, evidence suggests that REST also could have played a role in the cross-border smuggling of arms and diversion of funds to the TPLF during the counter-insurgencies in the 1980s.⁹⁴¹ Although REST had separate offices and staff, to many in the region it was seen as synonymous with the TPLF.⁹⁴² By March, its 11 offices had been looted, its 33 warehouses of aid were destroyed and 70 of its trucks had been stolen.⁹⁴³ The new 'caretaker administrative board' has replaced the old management and board members with individuals largely from the Amhara ethnic group.⁹⁴⁴ Criticism quickly began to mount, indicating that the new leadership, in collaboration with military actors, are selling aid on for profit, rather than delivering it to those in need.⁹⁴⁵

On 11 February, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made the following statement: *"Ending the suffering in Tigray and around the country is now my highest priority. This is why I am calling for the United Nations and international relief agencies to work with my government."* This statement appears contradictory to the reports from aid organisations and human rights groups. Just a day earlier at a webinar hosted by Chatham House, Mark Lowcock raised his fears that due to continued access restraints and conflict related complications 80% of the population was still not being reached by humanitarian agencies operating in the region.⁹⁴⁶ These concerns were mirrored by OCHA Official Jens Laerke, who noted that access permissions

⁹³⁸ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, *The New Humanitarian*, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹³⁹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁹⁴⁰ Freedom House (1990) Focus On Issues: No.10 Ethiopia The Politics Of Famine

⁹⁴¹ Martin Plaut (2018): The Ethiopian Famine, *The RUSI Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2017.1414736

⁹⁴² World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpfiles/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁹⁴³ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁹⁴⁴ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁹⁴⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. *Journal Of Maps*, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

⁹⁴⁶ Chatham House Webinar (2021) Responding To The Humanitarian Situation In Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Available At: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/responding-humanitarian-situation-ethiopia-tigray-region>.

were significantly holding up the delivery of aid: *“The problem is access both to get into Tigray in the first place and also getting from Mekelle into the countryside where most of the people in need are.”*⁹⁴⁷ Many of the north-western Woredas and Kebeles were off limits to aid agencies throughout February, as actors on the ground denied them access.⁹⁴⁸ Additionally, in OCHA’s February report, it is clear that the shortage of personnel was hampering the aid effort: *“Although progress has been made, with an increasing amount of humanitarian cargo mobilized, critical staff needed to scale up assistance have not been able to travel to Tigray.”*⁹⁴⁹ Despite humanitarian workers being poised and ready to move in to assist with the aid distribution, the agencies needed clearance from the Federal government to bring in more staff for the humanitarian response, which even in February was still pending.⁹⁵⁰ As such, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s statement appears detached from reality.

Reports of increasing hunger and malnutrition continued to flow out of Tigray during February, with OCHA reporting that *“[a]ccess to essential services, telecommunications, cash and fuel remains largely disrupted, compounding an already acute situation, and preventing people from meeting their vital and most basic needs.”*⁹⁵¹ Thousands of people in Tigray had not received any assistance for the four months since conflict began.⁹⁵² At this point, only 1% of nutrition treatment facilities located across Tigray were reachable.⁹⁵³ Despite being granted greater access than other humanitarian agencies Médecins Sans Frontiers and the International Commission of the Red Cross faced significant impediments to access due to security issues and lack of authorisation.⁹⁵⁴ The Ethiopian Red Cross was given the most access permissions but still reported only being able to access 20% of those in need.⁹⁵⁵ As the number of people taking refuge in remote areas was still unknown due to a lack of access, many more people could have been in need of lifesaving support than originally believed. Despite this, the Ethiopian government claimed to have already helped 1.8 million people through the delivery of 31,000 tonnes of critical food supplies by mid-February.⁹⁵⁶ Commentators have suggested that these aid deliveries had little impact on slowing the deterioration of food security within the region,

⁹⁴⁷ American Stock News (2021) Aid Agencies Renew Appeals For Aid Access To All Areas In Ethiopia’s Tigray, Available at: <https://americanstocknews.com/politics/aid-agencies-renew-appeals-for-aid-access-to-all-areas-in-ethiopia-tigray/>.

⁹⁴⁸ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-4-february-2021>.

⁹⁴⁹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-4-february-2021>.

⁹⁵⁰ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-4-february-2021>.

⁹⁵¹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-4-february-2021>.

⁹⁵² OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 28th February, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>.

⁹⁵³ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 4th February, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-4-february-2021>.

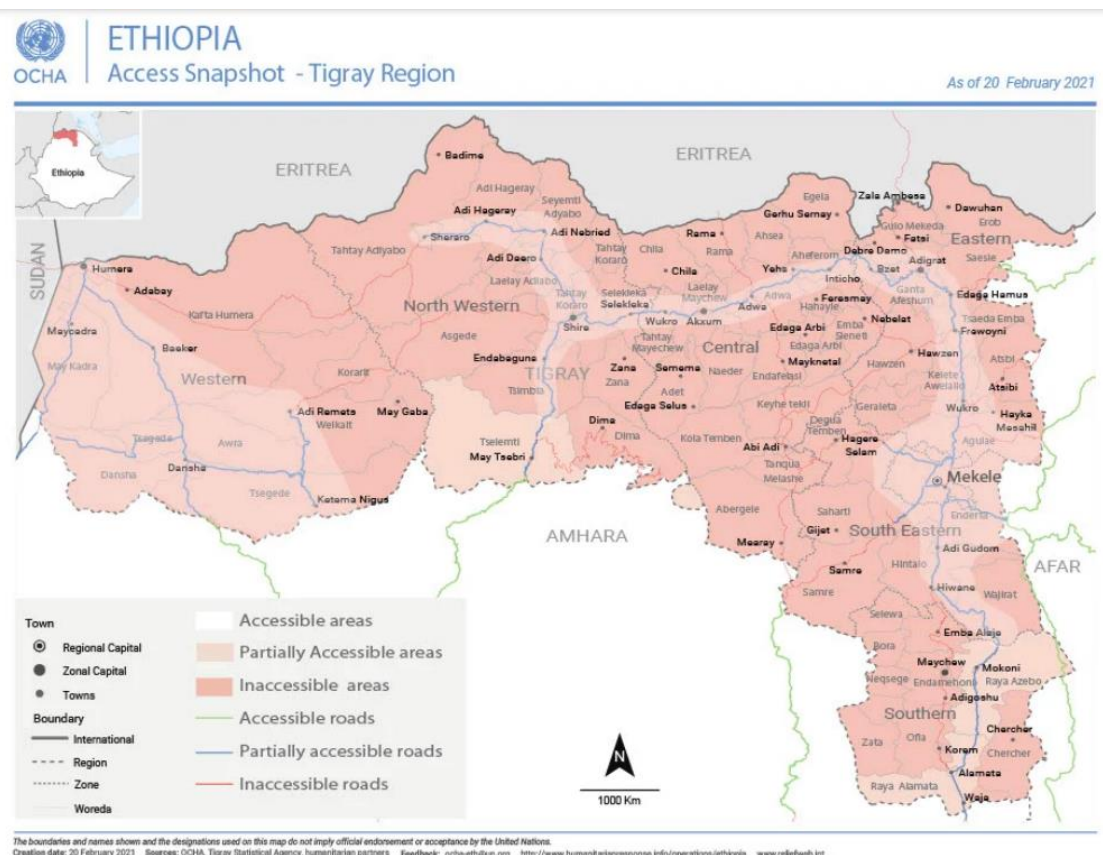
⁹⁵⁴ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹⁵⁵ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹⁵⁶ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

implying either negligence, incompetence, or nefarious activity within the governments aid distribution system.⁹⁵⁷

"You see their skin is really on their bones. You don't see any food in their body," Abera Tola, President of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society⁹⁵⁸



Humanitarian Access to Tigray by 20th February 2021⁹⁵⁹

In her 40 years of experience in the field, Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council Jan Egeland claimed that she had *"rarely seen a humanitarian response so impeded and unable to deliver."*⁹⁶⁰ By March, the little aid that had been allowed into Tigray was concentrated along the main road from Alamata to Shire. Some humanitarian agencies, including Action Against Hunger and World Vision, had managed to reach a number of smaller towns off the main road.⁹⁶¹ To make matters worse, the situation has been dangerous for the aid workers allowed into the region.

⁹⁵⁷ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹⁵⁸ Aljazeera (2021) 'Tens of thousands' could starve to death in Ethiopia's Tigray, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/red-cross-80-percent-of-ethiopias-tigray-cut-off-from-aid>; McCarthy (2021) Thousands of Ethiopians Under Siege in Tigray Region Could Die From Starvation, Global Citizen, Available at: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/ethiopia-tigray-hunger-starvation/>.

⁹⁵⁹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia – Tigray Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report 28th February, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>.

⁹⁶⁰ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

⁹⁶¹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation

A clearly marked Médecins Sains Frontiers convoy and two public busses were pulled over at what appeared to be the aftermath of an ambush.⁹⁶² The men from the busses in front were shot at the side of the road in front of the Médecins Sains Frontiers' staff. The Médecins Sains Frontiers' driver was beaten with the soldier's gun and threatened. A spokesperson for Médecins Sains Frontiers said "*Our teams are still reeling from witnessing the senseless loss of lives from this latest attack*".⁹⁶³ Things began to improve in March, when OCHA reported that more aid convoys and humanitarian staff were given access to the region. By 22 March, the UN had 240 staff on the ground,⁹⁶⁴ and had managed to secure use of working satellite dishes, nonetheless, they were still awaiting approval for satellite phones and communication equipment, which were restricted up until mid-March. An estimated 1 million people in urban areas and their surroundings had been reached with food aid by 22 March,⁹⁶⁵ although the Federal Government claimed this figure was much higher at 4 million people.⁹⁶⁶ Despite the rise in the number of aid beneficiaries, reports indicated that the frequency of aid deliveries was low. Those who had received aid, did so only once or twice in four months.⁹⁶⁷ Additionally, if the widely used estimate of 4.5 million people in dire need of aid is correct,⁹⁶⁸ then the number of those who actually received any form of aid is less than half. Arguably the real number is lower again.

At the United Nations Security Council debate on Conflict and Hunger in March, the situation in Tigray was highlighted by David Beasley, Chief of the World Food Programme. He told state representatives of the dreadful situation in Tigray, the worsening food insecurity and hampering of aid efforts.⁹⁶⁹ This indicates an acknowledgement by the international community that the situation in Tigray was deteriorating and provided a sign to the Ethiopian Government that the world was keeping a close eye on the reports which have leaked out from behind the information blackout. The ongoing violence in Central, Northern and Western Tigray continued to limit humanitarian access.⁹⁷⁰ Additionally, the continued fighting and control of main roads by militia has not only limited the distribution of

⁹⁶² BBC (2021) Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: MSF 'witnessed soldiers killing civilians', Available at:

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56524991#:~:text=m%20a9decins%20sans%20fronti%20a8res%20\(msf\)%20staff,a%20main%20road%20on%20tuesday](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56524991#:~:text=m%20a9decins%20sans%20fronti%20a8res%20(msf)%20staff,a%20main%20road%20on%20tuesday).

⁹⁶³ BBC (2021) Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: MSF 'witnessed soldiers killing civilians', Available at:

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56524991#:~:text=m%20a9decins%20sans%20fronti%20a8res%20\(msf\)%20staff,a%20main%20road%20on%20tuesday](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56524991#:~:text=m%20a9decins%20sans%20fronti%20a8res%20(msf)%20staff,a%20main%20road%20on%20tuesday).

⁹⁶⁴ World Peace Foundation (2021) Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine, Available At:

<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁹⁶⁵ OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At:

<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁹⁶⁶ FEWS NET (2021) Ethiopia, Available at: <https://fewsn.net/east-africa/ethiopia>.

⁹⁶⁷ Eritrea Hub (2021) Tigray: Only half the needy receiving aid – even then once or twice in four months, Available at:

<https://eritreahub.org/tigray-only-half-the-needy-receiving-aid-even-then-once-or-twice-in-four-months>.

⁹⁶⁸ OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At:

<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

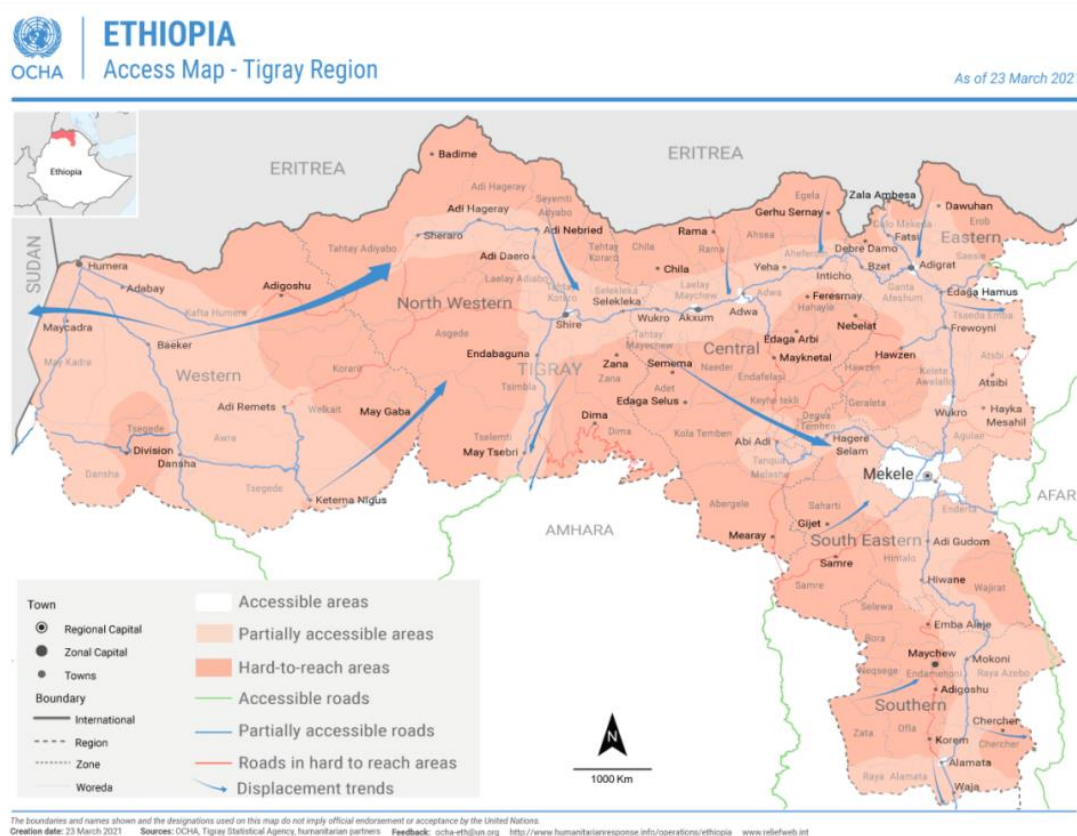
⁹⁶⁹ United Nations Security Council (2021) Conflict and Hunger Debate, Webcast Available At:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xORbIGef4Mo>.

⁹⁷⁰ OCHA (2021) March Update – Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Available At:

<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

aid, but also limited movement to aid distribution sites.⁹⁷¹ Despite repeated claims by Mr. Abiy's office that Ethiopia had provided "unfettered" access to humanitarian agencies in Tigray, on the 8th April, repeated calls for better access to the region and the cessation of hostilities were raised at the United Nations Security Council.⁹⁷²



Humanitarian Access to Tigray by 23rd March 2021⁹⁷³ (slight improvements from February)

Since March, the distribution of aid has not been without challenges. Fuel shortages have impacted the delivery of aid. Large swathes of the region are controlled by armed groups, where heavy fighting has restricted humanitarian access.⁹⁷⁴ Despite the Prime Ministers' Office declaring that aid workers had 'unfettered' access across Tigray, new checkpoints manned by soldiers in uniforms have demanded permits and refused entry arbitrarily. These factors have caused significant delays in the movement of aid.⁹⁷⁵ The lack of access and excessive bureaucratic hurdles are compounding the already dire conditions for households in Tigray. One farmer told the BBC: "We were eating small remains of crops that we managed to hide, but now we

⁹⁷¹ World Peace Foundation (2021) *Starving Tigray: How Armed Conflict And Mass Atrocities Have Destroyed An Ethiopian Region's Economy And Food System And Are Threatening Famine*, Available At: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/starving-tigray-report-final.pdf>

⁹⁷² Besheer (2021) *UN: Hunger, Rape Rising in Ethiopia's Tigray*, VOA, Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/ethiopia-tigray/un-hunger-rape-rising-ethiopia-tigray>

⁹⁷³ OCHA (2021) *March Update - Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update*, Available At: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>

⁹⁷⁴ United Nations (2021) *Tigray: UN Calls for immediate access to Ethiopian province to distribute food aid*, Available at: <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2021/06/1097932>

⁹⁷⁵ OCHA (28 May 2021) *Ethiopia, Tigray Region Humanitarian Update*, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202020%20May%202021.pdf>

don't have anything. Nobody has given us any aid. Almost everyone is on the verge of death - our eyes are affected by the hunger, the situation is perilous. Death is knocking on our door. You can see the hunger on the face of each of us."⁹⁷⁶

The worrying report that many in Tigray face Phase 5 'famine' conditions has provided a rallying cry for aid agencies. The World Food Programme has ramped up their emergency food aid operation, deploying 180 more staff and scaling up food distributions. However, the Director of the WFP, David Beasley laments: "*The brutal reality for our staff in Tigray is that for every family we reach with vital food, there are countless more, especially in rural areas, that we cannot reach*".⁹⁷⁷ All humanitarian agencies operating in the region have reported continued difficulty reaching those in need, especially in rural areas. Although the UN officially stated that 2.8 million people had been reached with food aid by June, humanitarian workers believe this figure to be considerably lower at only 13% of the 5.5 million people in need of food aid; a result of continued hostilities and barriers to access.⁹⁷⁸

Access for nutritional support

Following the resumption of nutrition activities in February, UNICEF were reporting a worrying trend. For the month of February, more children were admitted for treatment of Severe malnutrition' (SAM) at a small number of UNICEF clinics, than the pre-conflict region-wide figure.⁹⁷⁹ By April nearly 10% of the children across Tigray had been screened by humanitarian agencies in collaboration with the Regional Health Bureau. According to the World Health Organisation, the level of 'moderate malnutrition' (MAM) and SAM in children under 59 months provides an indication of the entire population's food security.⁹⁸⁰ Alarmingly, 25% of the children screened fell under the MAM category, while 2.9% were identified as SAM.⁹⁸¹ These statistics are even more disturbing when placed in the context of the decades of improvement in nutrition which preceded the current conflict. At the time, commentators were speculating that 100 children were dying each day due to malnutrition.⁹⁸²

In some areas the figures are even more concerning. At one mobile clinic, run by the International Rescue Committee and UNICEF, at the IDP camp in Mai Tsebri, the demand for nutritional assistance by both IDPs and the community is

⁹⁷⁶ BBC News (2021) Tigray conflict: 'We have no food, we face death', Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57397901>

⁹⁷⁷ United Nations (2021) Tigray: UN Calls for immediate access to Ethiopian province to distribute food aid, Available at: <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2021/06/1097932>

⁹⁷⁸ Alex de Waal (2021) Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Tragedy of the man-made famine, BBC, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57422168.amp>

⁹⁷⁹ OCHA (28 February 2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update; Situation Report. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-28-february-2021>;

⁹⁸⁰ Global Health Learning (n.d.) Understanding the Difference Among MAM, SAM, and GAM and their Importance on a Population Basis, Available at: <https://www.globalhealthlearning.org/sites/default/files/page-files/MAM%2C%20SAM%2C%20and%20GAM.pdf>.

⁹⁸¹ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, Accessed April 2021, Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/#cf-1tz6tiwhuhbhu38j9bjewi>.

⁹⁸² De Waal (2021) In The Tigray War Weaponised Starvation Takes A Devastating Toll, World Politics Review, Available At: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29548/in-the-tigray-war-weaponized-starvation-takes-a-devastating-toll>

overwhelming. In just four days, 643 children were screened, 12% and 23% were diagnosed with SAM and MAM respectively.⁹⁸³ *“IRC/UNICEF are providing us with all the necessary drugs to treat children. What we are lacking is essential drugs to treat adults,”* says Berhe Gebremeskel, a Health Officer at Mai Tsebri, Mobile Health and Nutrition Team (MHNT). *“For example, we have screened 54 pregnant and lactating women today and 26 have moderate acute malnutrition. And from the 205 children screened for malnutrition this morning, 139 are moderately malnourished.”*⁹⁸⁴ Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUFT) donated by USAID is being handed out to parents for their malnourished children and emergency drug kits have been procured with UK Government funding. This is just one of 22 Mobile Health and Nutrition Teams (MHNTs) operated by UNICEF in the region since access was granted, indicating the severity of food insecurity. However, by June, OCHA reported the desperate need for more Ready-to-Use-Therapeutic Food (RUFT) Vitamin A and Albendazole for children in Eastern Tigray.⁹⁸⁵

Worke Tsegaye, a twenty-year-old young mother had left her home in December, travelling for three months through active conflict zones to reach safety and find treatment for her two-year-old son’s fever.⁹⁸⁶ Her husband remained behind, reluctant to leave his home, so with no way of getting in touch, Worke does not even know if he is still alive: *“We were so scared of the conflict and everyone left the town all at once. We moved from one place to the other until we reached in Mai Tsebri. It was difficult.”* She walks two hours a day to the IDP site, where she receives water, healthcare, and hygiene products.⁹⁸⁷ Having been unable to afford treatment for her son at the local health centre, the mobile clinic has provided them with a lifeline. Her story is just one of many which remain untold.

7.7 The politicisation of aid

There are mounting concerns that although food aid has now reached Tigray, it is not enough and is not reaching those who it is intended for.⁹⁸⁸ Widespread looting and interference with aid distributions has led to reports of aid being diverted to Eritrean and Amhara militia.⁹⁸⁹ An investigation into the official amount of aid donated and eyewitness testimony within Tigray shows a discrepancy between the amount of aid donated and what has been received. In Shire, two deliveries of food

⁹⁸³ Mulatu (2021) UNICEF steps up treatment of children with malnutrition in Tigray Region, UNICEF, Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/unicef-steps-treatment-children-malnutrition-tigray-region>.

⁹⁸⁴ Mulatu (2021) UNICEF steps up treatment of children with malnutrition in Tigray Region, UNICEF, Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/unicef-steps-treatment-children-malnutrition-tigray-region>.

⁹⁸⁵ OCHA (2021) Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update, Situation Report, June, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20Situation%20Report%2C%2010%20June%202021.pdf>

⁹⁸⁶ Mulatu (2021) UNICEF steps up treatment of children with malnutrition in Tigray Region, UNICEF, Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/unicef-steps-treatment-children-malnutrition-tigray-region>.

⁹⁸⁷ Mulatu (2021) UNICEF steps up treatment of children with malnutrition in Tigray Region, UNICEF, Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/unicef-steps-treatment-children-malnutrition-tigray-region>.

⁹⁸⁸ Tim Vandenbempt And Jan Nyssen Feb 2021: What Happens With The Limited Volumes Of Food Aid That Are Sent To Tigray? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349279837_what_happens_with_the_limited_volumes_of_food_aid_that_are_sent_to_tigray

⁹⁸⁹ Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe Stalks Tigray, Again. Ethiopia Insight, 19 February 2021. <https://www.ethiopiainsight.com/2021/02/19/Catastrophe-Stalks-Tigray-Again/>

aid were distributed by the Federal Government in December and January.⁹⁹⁰ The December delivery amounted to between 1100 and 1760 tonnes of food aid. The first of the deliveries should have provided the inhabitants and IDPs with 15kg of food aid per person, while the January delivery was believed to be able to last inhabitants for two months. However, conversations with people in Shire illustrate a different reality. Not all the intended recipients received food aid, and many that did were forced to sign for 15kg when they only received 7kg.⁹⁹¹ This activity is not restricted to Shire, and many rural areas have not seen any aid at all.⁹⁹² The same investigation revealed that Eritrean soldiers had stolen food aid from IDPs who were living in the Aksum University Shire Campus.⁹⁹³ Further evidence suggests that the individuals in charge of distributing the aid were syphoning it off and selling it on for profit.⁹⁹⁴

In a similar fashion, reports from northern areas of Tigray near the Eritrean border indicate that despite food aid reaching the woredas, it was all promptly stolen by the Eritrean army.⁹⁹⁵ One humanitarian worker recalled their sorrow when they witnessed this first hand: *"We went to bring food aid to a town in a woreda that is fully controlled by the Eritrean army. All the food aid that we brought was taken by the Eritrean soldiers. I was so sad."*⁹⁹⁶ Unfortunately these events are common in Tigray. In early June, the Ethiopian Defence Forces apprehended INGO trucks containing flour and essential non-food items. They arrested the trucks drivers and confiscated the aid. The goods in question had been purchased with money from the Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund, the United Nations fund collected from international donors.⁹⁹⁷ The ethical concerns associated with the misappropriation of aid by Ethiopian soldiers are alarming. This pattern has been repeated since the conflict began. The limited data available makes it difficult to assess how much aid has been looted or has reached the intended beneficiaries. Researchers from the University of Ghent indicate that no aid has been distributed in areas under Amhara control and several

⁹⁹⁰ OCHA (2020) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update - Situation Report December, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-28-december-2020;> OCHA (2021) Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update - Situation Report 25 January, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-25-january-2021>.

⁹⁹¹ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹² Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹³ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹⁴ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹⁵ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹⁶ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint, Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_tigray_atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

⁹⁹⁷ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

other woredas where access has been denied due to pervasive fighting.⁹⁹⁸ It is estimated that over 2 million people have not received any aid between the beginning of the conflict in November and June 2021.

Since 10 February, Ethiopian soldiers have prevented food aid from reaching Hawzena and Tembein, known TPLF strongholds. They ordered the aid to be returned to Mekelle, so as to prevent it from entering a region inhabited by their opposition. The Ethiopian forces thus demonstrated that starvation is a tactic, if not a policy objective of their campaign. In further support of this, individuals operating on the ground have outlined how the Ethiopian government's relief plans do not discuss how aid could be distributed within the TPLF controlled areas.⁹⁹⁹ Similar tactics have been used by the Eritrean soldiers, who have withheld aid from those suspected to be TPLF sympathisers or fighters.¹⁰⁰⁰ In one interview, a witness from Irob recalled the horrifying scene when Eritrean soldiers threatened her by saying: *"If you don't bring your father, your brothers, you don't get the aid, you'll starve"*.¹⁰⁰¹ Should the men in the family be handed over to the Eritrean soldiers, their fate would almost certainly have been death.

OCHA have been recording each denial of humanitarian, and by 10 June there had been 131 incidents. A rise in violence against humanitarian workers has increased the risk of operating in the region. Aid workers have been intimidated, arrested, assaulted, and even killed.¹⁰⁰² In May, Samantha Power, the administrator of USAID raised her concerns over the intentional attacks on aid workers, which by this point had left eight humanitarian workers killed in action.¹⁰⁰³ Of the 131 violations, 54 were undertaken by Ethiopian soldiers, 50 committed by Eritrean soldiers, 4 by combined Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, 21 by Amhara militias and 1 by Tigrayan opposition forces.¹⁰⁰⁴ As such, no parties to the conflict have clean hands.

Other worrying reports of the politicisation of aid have seeped out of Tigray.

⁹⁹⁸ Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

⁹⁹⁹ Parker (2021) Relief for Tigray stalled as Ethiopian government curbs access, The New Humanitarian, Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/2/11/humanitarian-access-stalled-in-ethiopia-tigray>.

¹⁰⁰⁰ And Also: Tim Vandenbempt And Jan Nyssen Feb 2021: What Happens With The Limited Volumes Of Food Aid That Are Sent To Tigray? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349279837_what_happens_with_the_limited_volumes_of_food_aid_that_are_sent_to_tigray

¹⁰⁰¹ Tim Vandenbempt And Jan Nyssen Feb 2021: What Happens With The Limited Volumes Of Food Aid That Are Sent To Tigray? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349279837_what_happens_with_the_limited_volumes_of_food_aid_that_are_sent_to_tigray

¹⁰⁰² Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

¹⁰⁰³ Agence France Presse (2021) Aid Worker Slain In 'Fire Fight' In Ethiopia's Tigray, Available at: <https://www.barrons.com/news/aid-worker-slain-in-fire-fight-in-ethiopia-s-tigray-01622463613>

¹⁰⁰⁴ US-EU High Level Roundtable (2021) The Humanitarian Emergency in Tigray, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiEYJ9CfgyY&t=2981s>

Civilians trying to reach aid distribution points face perilous journeys, with the risk of hitting roadblocks, extortionate bribes, or targeted violence. One farmer told the BBC: *"When we want to go to the place where there is aid all roads are blocked... Even if we try on foot, if the militias from Amhara found us they force us to pay 4,000-5,000 birr [between \$90 and \$115] each."* Another farmer added: *"If we try to go to the place where there is aid we will be killed in the forest"*.¹⁰⁰⁵ What's more, in many woredas, unless a Prosperity Party administrator (the Ethiopian Federal Government's party) was appointed, aid was withheld. Additionally, local NGOs have reported that those who became Prosperity Party members were rewarded with larger rations of food aid.¹⁰⁰⁶ This use of food as a means to bribe starving civilians for political support, while withholding food from dissidents, is a calculated, inexcusable, inhumane act. The patterns of despair, misery and malnutrition which have been reported illustrates a daunting picture of devastation across Tigray, which will only get worse if unhindered access is not granted and hostilities ceased.

7.8 Is history repeating itself?

As has been demonstrated, conflict and poor policy decisions led to the calamitous events in 1984.¹⁰⁰⁷ Since then, the region had been the site of impressive development, with food security and health improving across the board. The growth of industry and microfinances provided Tigrayans with new freedoms through financial security. It is painful to view the ongoing conflict in the light of these developments; decades of hard work have been undone in a matter of months. Although the Coronavirus pandemic and locust invasion impacted the region, the conflict has devastated all hopes of immediate food security. The alarming reports of human rights violations which have occurred since November, and which continue to unfold, will scar Tigray for many years to come.

The September to January harvest was damaged by locusts, then interrupted by the beginning of the conflict. The sowing season from April-June 2021 ahead of the kiremt rainy season has also been disrupted. The soils have been scorched of their fertility, people have been displaced from their land, and grain stores have been looted. It is unclear how many farmers still have access to fertile land or seed. With livestock slaughtered and equipment pillaged, it is uncertain how many farmers will be able to plough what land still remains. The Bureau of Agriculture has begun a three-month plan to assist farmers in accessible areas ahead of the kiremt rains, however there is a desperate need for a ceasefire so that farmers can sow their crops safely.¹⁰⁰⁸ There is also a demand for seed, as grain has been consumed in order to stay alive. Despite these efforts, many people remain inaccessible, do not have land

¹⁰⁰⁵BBC News (2021) Tigray conflict: 'We have no food, we face death', Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57397901>

¹⁰⁰⁶ Tim Vandembemt And Jan Nyssen Feb 2021: What Happens With The Limited Volumes Of Food Aid That Are Sent To Tigray? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349279837_what_happens_with_the_limited_volumes_of_food_aid_that_are_sent_to_tigray

¹⁰⁰⁷ De Waal (1997) Famine Crimes (Indiana University Press, Indiana); De Waal (2018) Mass Starvation (Polity Books, Cambridge).

¹⁰⁰⁸ De Waal (2021) The World Bank Should Not Fund Ethiopia's War In Tigray, The Financial Times, Available At: <https://eritreahub.org/the-world-bank-should-not-fund-ethiopias-war-in-tigray>.

or seed to sow, or are in sites of ongoing conflict. Fears that the upcoming growing season from June to November will be lost are mounting. If this happens, it could be a year until the people of Tigray are able to grow their own food. This would further decimate hopes for long-term food security in the region, as recovery to pre-conflict levels of food security could take many years. As such, the battle wounds will not fade if the next harvest is prevented...

"Farmers express their hope that the war should be over before kremti, otherwise there will be huge famine and starvation next year." Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, Senior Fellow at the World Peace Foundation & TPLF¹⁰⁰⁹

Despite attempts to conceal the real extent of the human rights violations from the world, information has leaked out of the region and modern techniques (open-source investigations and satellite imagery) have been used to corroborate reports of widespread and systematic starvation crimes against the civilian population. However, the communication blackout and limited access to the region means the sheer extent of suffering is still unknown. By keeping networks down and limiting access, starvation crimes are being concealed.

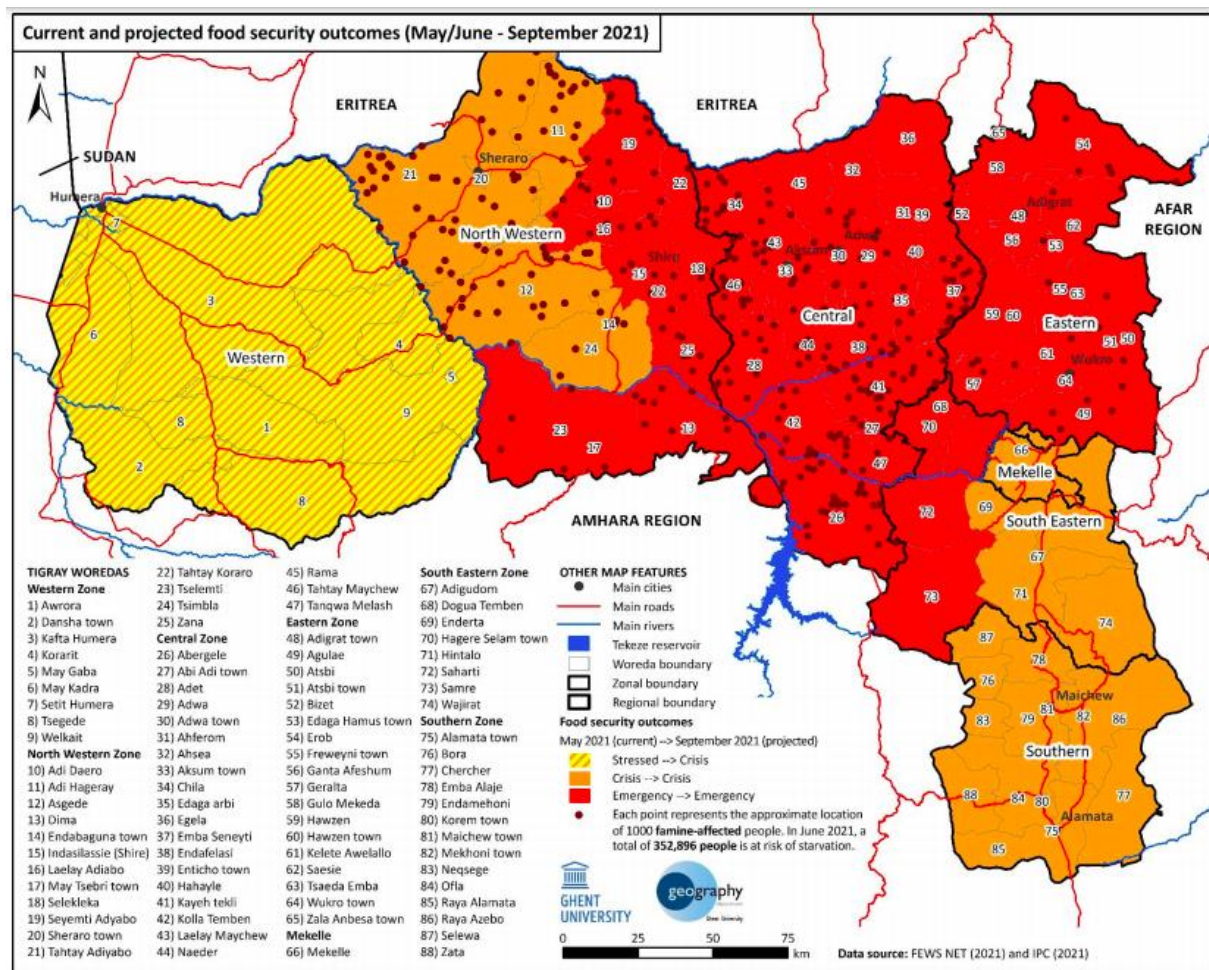
"One day I fear an ashamed world will apologize to the people of Tigray for not doing more. The communication blackout in the region and the distraction of a global pandemic will not stand up as adequate excuses. We know too much already" Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, Founder and CEO of Mary's Meals.¹⁰¹⁰

The disruption to economic activity, destruction, looting and pillaging of food supplies, inaccessibility of financial savings, withholding of wages, and high levels of displacement, have left over 5.5 million people in Tigray food insecure. The IPC report released in June should shock the world. This is now the worst food security crisis since Somalia in 2011 and without immediate action more lives will be lost. If the conflict does not escalate further and 60% of the population are reached with aid, it is still predicted that 400,000 people will be facing famine-like conditions by September.¹⁰¹¹ Unfortunately, this could be the best-case scenario if action is not taken immediately.

¹⁰⁰⁹ World Peace Foundation (2021) "They Have Destroyed Tigray, Literally": Mulugeta Gebrehiwot speaks from the mountains of Tigray, Transcript of phone call available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/files/2021/01/mulugeta-call-27-jan-full-transcript1-1.pdf>

¹⁰¹⁰ Mary's Meals (2021) Crisis in Ethiopia: behind the blackout in Tigray, Available at: <https://www.marysmealsusa.org/en/who-we-are/news-and-blogs/crisis-in-ethiopia-behind-the-blackout-in-tigray>.

¹⁰¹¹ IPC (2021) Ethiopia: Acute Food Insecurity Situation May-June 2021 and Projection for July-September, Available at: <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/resources/resources-details/en/c/1154899/>



Portrays May-June 2021 food security, and predicted food security for July-September 2021¹⁰¹²

"We cannot make the same mistake twice, we cannot let Ethiopia starve" Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Representative to the United Nations

At the US-EU roundtable on the eve of the G7 summit in June, the UN's Humanitarian Chief outlined, with uncomfortable gravity, the process of dying of starvation. With no food, the metabolism slows down to preserve energy for the vital organs. Fatigue, irritability, and confusion sets in. The immune system loses strength. The likelihood of dying from other diseases, such as cholera or Covid-19 increases. For those who escape disease, but remain without food, the vital organs wither and fail. Eventually the body devours its own muscles. Hallucinations and convulsions prelude the heart stopping. "[T]his is a terrible agonising and humiliating death, it is going to happen to a lot of people [in Tigray]... and that is particularly cruel in a world like ours where there is in fact more than enough food for everyone. This is a solvable problem and we really have to solve it" Mark Lowcock, OCHA

¹⁰¹² Source: ATLAS Map, which used information from FEWS NET and IPC, see: Annys, S., Vanden Bempt, T., Negash, E., De Sloover, L., Nyssen, J., 2021. Tigray: Atlas Of The Humanitarian Situation. Journal Of Maps, Preprint [June edition], Available At: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation/link/60c37ed14585157774cc5722/download

There is evidence to suggest that starvation is not only being used as a tactic, but also as a weapon of war in Tigray. Through the destruction of harvests, scorched earth tactics and slaughtering of livestock, the ability for Tigrayans to produce their own food has been removed. Through the looting and pillaging of possessions and businesses, as well as the attacks on the banking system and work opportunities, the ability for Tigrayans to buy food has been removed. Through the obstruction, diversion and withholding of aid, the ability of Tigrayans to access lifesaving food has been removed. A famine far exceeding the devastation of the 1984-85 famine could indeed occur in the coming months, if unhindered access to all areas of Tigray is not granted to humanitarian workers and if relief is not delivered to all those in need rather than used to fuel the war. A cessation of hostilities is essential for food security in the region.

8. The plight of Eritrean refugees

By Mike Slotznick¹⁰¹³

Introduction

Within weeks after the start of the war in Tigray, Eritrean troops began invading United Nations-supported camps that sustained Eritrean refugees there. The camps, situated just inside the Ethiopian border, housed nearly 100,000 Eritreans who had fled the brutal Eritrean regime. The troops killed some of the refugees, obliterated two of the four camps, and forced several thousand refugees back into Eritrea, where they faced conscription into the invading army, or imprisonment and torture for having initially fled their home country. Eritrean refugees elsewhere in Ethiopia, particularly in the capital city Addis Ababa, also became subject to abduction. Armed Tigrayan actors also attacked some of the refugees in the camps. All of those activities constitute violations of international law.¹⁰¹⁴

The atrocities committed against the Eritrean refugees occurred contemporaneously with those committed against Tigrayans and others. In many ways they were all of a piece, reflecting the overall ascendance of violence, demolition of societal order and erasure of human dignity. The author does not compare them, one to the next. Rather, he has attempted in this chapter to narrow his topic to its title.

8.1 Who are the refugees, and why are they in Ethiopia?

¹⁰¹³ Mike Slotznick is counsel to The America Team for Displaced Eritreans (hereafter, “The America Team”). <https://eritreanrefugees.org/>. The America Team is an all-volunteer organization, based in Pennsylvania, that helps Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the U.S. and around the world. Other members of The America Team contributed substantially to this chapter.

¹⁰¹⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10> and <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/12/5fd3ab2d4/statement-attributable-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-situation.html> and https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A_HRC_47_21_E.pdf at pages. 13-15 and <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26806&LangID=E> and <https://www.voanews.com/africa/rights-groups-sound-alarm-over-safety-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia>

Eritrea is one of the most repressive countries on earth. It is widely referred to as “the North Korea of Africa” – due to its hermetic isolation, and to the government’s brutalization and enslavement of its own people, even as they suffer from malnourishment and destitution. Major human rights organizations have amply documented those conditions. In 2016 a United Nations investigatory panel – the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI) –accused the ruling regime of crimes against humanity.¹⁰¹⁵ But the regime has been impervious to its widespread condemnation, and the abuses have continued.

There has been no census of Eritrea in modern times, so there is no authoritative figure for its population. The Eritrean government provided an estimate of 3.65 million in 2015.¹⁰¹⁶ By contrast, the CIA estimate for 2021 is a population of 6.15 million.¹⁰¹⁷ Either way, it is extraordinary that by 2018 some 500,000 Eritreans had fled to other lands, including to the Tigray region of Ethiopia.¹⁰¹⁸

To explain the flight, we should first describe its causes.

a) Crimes against humanity.

After a 30-year war of secession from Ethiopia, Eritrea gained its independence – *de facto* in 1991 and officially in 1993. The secessionists had promised the Eritrean people democracy, and a democratic constitution was ratified in 1997. But the constitution was never implemented; the new state never became democratic; elections were never held; and, from the start, the country was ruled by the iron hand of the secessionist leader, Isaias Afwerki. The repression avalanched shortly after Eritrea’s 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, in which over 100,000 combatants in the aggregate are estimated to have died.¹⁰¹⁹ The war had been waged nominally over a disputed boundary, but broader tensions had preceded it, and the armistice resolved nothing. In any event, the war was widely considered not only a defeat but a catastrophe for Eritrea, which had fired the first shots. Enraged, humiliated, possibly fearing an overthrow, and in any case bent on retaining control his country, Isaias moved to shutter all internal political dissent. What ensued was a near-total evisceration of personal freedoms and an acute violation of human rights, as documented by major governmental, inter-governmental and human rights organizations and as summarized in a paper posted by The America Team for Displaced Eritreans (hereafter, The America Team) in October 2016.¹⁰²⁰ Since then,

¹⁰¹⁵ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/093/42/PDF/G1609342.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁰¹⁶ Eritrea: Initial National Report (1999-2016) Prepared on the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), 28 March 2017, The State of Eritrea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, page 25, paragraph 89. <https://eritreahub.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Eritrea-response-to-African-Human-Rights-Charter.pdf>

¹⁰¹⁷ CIA Factbook Eritrea, 2021

<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea/#people-and-society>

¹⁰¹⁸ Multiple sources indicate or suggest that the stated number of refugees pertains to those who have fled Eritrea during the current regime (that is, since 1991), and who still have refugee or similar status, as opposed to prior waves of refugees from Eritrea. See, e.g., <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/concern-grows-for-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-as-tigray-war-rages> and <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/escaping-eritrea/> and <https://www.unhcr.org/5fc504d44.pdf> at page 12

¹⁰¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eritrean%E2%80%93Ethiopian_border_conflict

¹⁰²⁰ <https://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ERITREAN-ASYLUM-CLAIMS-SUMMARY7-2020.pdf.pdf> . The paper contains many footnoted references, sourced to the major human rights reports that it summarizes.

the regime's human rights abuses have continued, and The America Team has continued to track and post reports of them.¹⁰²¹ A restatement of the core reporting in the October 2016 paper follows.

□ *Authoritarian police state.* The governing regime is authoritarian; no elections have been held for decades; only one political party is permitted; independent non-governmental associations are forbidden; public assemblies for all but recreational or government-sponsored purposes are outlawed; academic freedom is restricted; foreign organizations (and funding from them) are mostly banned; citizens are subjected to constant governmental surveillance and intimidation; the judiciary is not independent; justice is administered without rule of law; and the regime governs by sowing fear. (A documentary film entitled "Escaping Eritrea," produced and directed by Evan Williams and released by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) on May 4, 2021, describes in horrific and graphic detail the conditions that have forced Eritreans to flee their homeland en masse.¹⁰²²)

□ *Throttling of press and political expression.* No freedom of the press or political expression is permitted. Journalists and political opponents have frequently been jailed, often never to be heard from again.

□ *Harsh imprisonment, including of family members.* Any suspected dissent on the part of citizens is routinely punished by imprisonment, commonly in underground shipping containers, and commonly under intolerable, inhumane conditions – including starvation, overcrowding, lack of medical attention, rape of female prisoners, lack of sanitation, and extreme cold and heat – which conditions, separately or in the aggregate, often lead to death in detention. Arrests are commonly arbitrary, and prisoners are not informed of charges against them. Political prisoners are held incommunicado and are denied access to lawyers or family members. Family members for their part are often imprisoned or otherwise punished as well: sometimes for merely inquiring about the location or status of their imprisoned loved ones; for the failure of a loved one living overseas to pay the 2% income tax that the government imposes on Eritreans worldwide; or for a loved one's desertion from the country's slave-like military service (see below).

□ *Religious persecution.* The practice of only four religions is permitted, and Eritrean faith institutions are controlled by the government. The Orthodox Church's freely chosen patriarch has been under house arrest for years, and in May 2021 he was deposed and replaced by the regime.¹⁰²³ Sunni leaders have been imprisoned and tortured. Various Protestant sects are harshly persecuted: dissent by their followers and unauthorized religious practice are routinely punished by imprisonment. In prison, religious dissidents are often tortured until they renounce their faith.

¹⁰²¹ <https://eritreanrefugees.org/reference-materials-2/>. "Human Rights Have Not Improved in Eritrea Since the Rapprochement with Ethiopia"

¹⁰²² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/escaping-eritrea/>

¹⁰²³ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-regime-announces-election-of-new-patriarch-while-current-patriarch-under-house-arrest/>

□ *Torture.* Imprisonment for any of the above offenses commonly results in gruesome physical and psychological torture, from which many prisoners are believed to die. Many detention facilities are known to exist throughout the country, where tortuous conditions and mistreatment are likely to exist.

□ *Travel restrictions.* Entering and exiting the country is tightly controlled. Those who exit without visas – notably, to escape the regime overland in pursuit of refuge in another country – are in peril for their lives, in that government security forces have at times had orders to shoot-to-kill at the country's borders. While those orders have been variously enforced in recent years, at a minimum, would-be escapees who are captured are frequently imprisoned and sometimes tortured.

□ *Slave-like national service.* All citizens are subject by conscription to mandatory national service, either military or civil. Children are routinely conscripted at age 17, and sometimes as young as 15. The service may last for an indefinite term of years, sometimes decades; follow-up reserve duty (or required participation for older citizens in a "people's militia") can also last indefinitely, and reservists are sometimes called up en masse; food is inadequate; wages are negligible, thus impoverishing the conscripts' families; farms are left with inadequate labor; long-term conscripts are unable to form families or to fully participate in family life; conscripts are commonly forced to work for government and military officials in their private affairs or for government-controlled and even foreign enterprises, often in harsh conditions; female conscripts are commonly abused sexually by their commanding officers and others; and any dissent while in the national service (including the practice of prohibited religions and refusing sexual advances) is commonly punished by imprisonment and torture. In sum, the national service has been widely viewed, including by the COI, as amounting to forced labor, and even slavery.

□ *Killings and disappearances.* The regime has engaged in extrajudicial executions, arbitrary killings, forced disappearances, mass murders of ethnic minorities, and executions of military deserters.

□ *Rape.* The rape of Eritrean women in the military and in detention, as described above, has been characterized in and of itself by the COI as a crime against humanity.

Where to flee?

From the outbreak of the war of liberation in the 1960s, Eritreans had sought refuge in regions adjacent to their homeland – either in Sudan or in the non-Eritrean parts of Ethiopia (of which Eritrea was a part until 1991). Following independence and then the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, Eritreans continued to flee to Sudan and Ethiopia. As a consequence, both countries came to hold large Eritrean populations. But refugee life in Sudan was (and remains) highly insecure, even in camps supported by the office of the UNHCR. Eritreans have at times been in danger of being robbed, murdered and kidnapped, then trafficked and tortured for

ransom. While some older Eritrean communities in eastern Sudan have felt safer, newer arrivals often have not. The refugees in Sudan thus have often sought to move elsewhere. Ethiopia thus became a nearby, alternative haven of preference for many. And many of those refugees who fled to Ethiopia settled in UNHCR-supported camps in Tigray, just south of the Eritrean border.

Prior to 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea were still bitter enemies, and the Ethiopian government could be generally relied upon for securing those camps. Ethiopia had welcomed and protected many thousands of refugees of many nationalities; plus, its government saw its protection of Eritrean refugees there as an embarrassment for the enemy Eritrean regime. Thus secured, genuine communities arose within the camps in Tigray, replete with education provided by international NGOs, former Eritrean teachers and the Ethiopian government. There were adequate (or barely adequate) food, water and sanitation, as provided by UNHCR and the NGOs; petty commercial enterprises run by refugees for refugees; and refugee civic councils interfacing between the refugees, on the one hand, and UNHCR, the NGOs and the Ethiopian government, on the other. In addition, the Tigrayan communities surrounding the camps acquiesced to or even affirmatively welcomed the Eritrean refugees – which is not always the case in refugee loci around the world. Why? Most Eritreans and the Tigrayans spoke Tigrinya. Many Eritreans also had family ties in Tigray, in that, until Eritrean independence, the border had been nominal and individuals had moved freely between the regions. Indeed, Eritreans and Tigrayans often expressed a general ethnic consanguinity and affinity with one another. Since the border war, in which Tigrayan-led Ethiopia was pitted against Eritrea, the Tigrayans also shared with the Eritrean refugees a hatred for and fear of the Eritrean regime. Tigrayans and encamped refugees enjoyed ongoing reciprocal trade, sometimes shared worship services and sometimes even shared the schooling of children.

But life in the Ethiopian camps was a dead-end for the residents. The living standard was rudimentary. As in refugee camps everywhere, one could not easily flourish as a vital participant in a nation, economy or fully constituted society. And there was little prospect in Tigray for any of the three ultimate destinies that UNHCR wishes for the refugees that it supports everywhere: safe return to one's homeland, resettlement in a third country, or absorption by the host country (including full participation in its civic and economic institutions). As to the first, Eritrea remained an inhospitable dystopia. As to the second, only a small fraction of UNHCR-supported refugees are ever resettled anywhere. And as to the third, Eritrean refugees could live in Ethiopian cities, but (until 2019) they could not lawfully work there.¹⁰²⁴ Forward migration thus beckoned, not only for the Eritreans in Sudan, but for those in Tigray as well.

Where then to migrate? Across the Middle East, Eritreans were unwelcome. Migrations to Israel by way of Egypt resulted in horrific rape, torture and extortion for cash at the hands of outlaw Bedouin tribesmen in the Sinai desert. Even the

¹⁰²⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/1/5c41b1784/unhcr-welcomes-ethiopia-law-granting-rights-refugees.html>

initial Israeli tolerance of African migrants who reached that country beginning in 2007 devolved into a backlash as their numbers grew. The Eritreans were physically safe there. But by 2012, Israel had enacted an “anti-infiltration law” targeting African migrants; it had constructed a fence at the border with Sinai to keep additional African migrants out; and it had begun to sorely pressure its existing Africans to resettle elsewhere.¹⁰²⁵

Contemporaneously, with the collapse of the Libyan state and the onset of massive African migrations across the Mediterranean from that country to Europe, Eritreans joined in the flow – passing through Sudan to Libya, where smugglers set them afloat in unseaworthy boats. Those migrations, or attempted migrations, reached a peak between 2015 and 2017. Many Eritreans and other migrants drowned or otherwise died at sea.¹⁰²⁶ Many of those who survived found themselves resented in Europe as part of what was widely referred to as a global migration crisis. In Libya itself they and other Africans were – and they continue to be – routinely enslaved, raped, tortured, extorted and otherwise savagely brutalized. Even the EU has participated in the tragedy, by funding and encouraging Libya’s militias and its coast guard to capture and detain those attempting to sail to Europe. The detentions in Libya are intended to keep the refugees from attempting the Mediterranean crossing again, and the conditions of detention are horrific. In sub-Saharan Africa, resentment and a dearth of economic opportunities also have greeted those Eritreans who have arrived. So small numbers of Eritreans (hundreds annually, not thousands) have chosen to head for the U.S.: they have undertaken a journey across Africa to South America and then northwards through the perilous jungles of Panama toward the U.S.-Mexico border. In America many have won asylum, but others have not.

In sum, outside of Tigray, there has been no ready haven for those on the run. A great many thus have remained concentrated in Ethiopia. On the eve of the Tigray conflict, UNHCR was supporting four Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray: Shimelba and Hitsats in the north – that is, closest to the Eritrean border – and Adi Harush and Mai Ayni further south. As of November 2020, UNHCR counted 8,702 refugees in Shimelba, 25,248 in Hitsats, 32,167 in Adi Harush, and 21,682 in Mai Ayni. In addition, the agency operated a reception center in Endabaguna for refugees first crossing the border into Ethiopia, where they would stay temporarily pending distribution to the various camps. It also counted 8,424 Eritrean refugees residing in towns in Tigray pursuant to the Ethiopian government’s Out of Camp Policy, bringing the total figure in Tigray to 96,223. In addition, some 51,800 Eritrean refugees were living in Ethiopia’s Afar region (many of those in UNHCR-supported camps), and 30,722 in Addis. The total number in Ethiopia was thus 178,745.¹⁰²⁷

¹⁰²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWLY6W68954> and <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-african-migrants-in-israel-have-little-hope-2014jan07-story.html> and <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5ae21b29f950b7532c2bb3cc/1524767531404/RI+Israel+Asylum+Report+April+2018.pdf>

¹⁰²⁶ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

¹⁰²⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%20%238%20-APR%201-15%202021.pdf> and <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%2010%20NovemberFIN>

As of 2015, around 100,000 Eritrean refugees were living in the camps in Tigray. When the war began in Tigray in 2020, the number was approximately the same. Yet for much of that time, thousands per month had been entering the camps from Eritrea. How to account for the relatively steady state of the camp population? Apparently as many as were arriving were moving on – whether to Ethiopian cities such as Addis; to Libya and then Europe (or the bottom of the Mediterranean); or elsewhere, wherever circumstances might permit, but not often with comfort or joy.

For its part, how did the Eritrean government view the refugees? Their having escaped the country was seen not merely as an embarrassment, but as likely to generate anti-regime narratives and agitation within whatever countries they landed in, including in the West. Regime operatives in Europe and the U.S. often harassed and occasionally assaulted refugees and asylees there. The regime particularly suspected refugees in Ethiopia of anti-Eritrea activities, and of being stoked in that by the Ethiopian government. In addition, the departure of refugees had bled Eritrea of both work force and military force. Not surprisingly, then, official Eritrean policy branded the refugees as traitors – particularly if they had escaped from or avoided military service, or if they had expressed opposition to Eritrea before or after fleeing. And for their treachery, if they were forcibly returned by another country, they stood to be imprisoned, tortured, and possibly killed. But in truth, the regime's actual outlook seemed more nuanced, or more confused. For example, in some ways, the regime may have been pleased that malcontents had taken their heterodox opinions elsewhere. Refugees in the West had also become an essential source of remittances and foreign exchange, as they supported their families back home in Eritrea. Further, the surge of asylum seekers into Europe resulted in Europe making substantial grants of development assistance to Eritrea (and to other countries of origin), which Europe hoped would stanch the in-flow. In addition, Eritrean border guards often accepted bribes from escaping refugees, and some high-ranking officers appeared to be trafficking in refugees for profit. Overall, the attitudes within in Eritrea relative to those who had escaped thus were mysterious from the outside, and possibly also from within.

As for the families left behind, there too was a mix. They felt terrified for those who had gone off to the perils of Sinai, Libya and the Mediterranean. And they felt anguished when they were extorted for cash to free those who were tortured en route – exorbitant sums, that could ruin a family financially for a generation. But if and when the refugees found a safe destination in which they could work, their families at home took much comfort in the remittances. Some relatives also hoped to rejoin in the West those who had succeeded in gaining refugee or asylum status there.

8.2 The rapprochement

[AL.pdf](#) . The stated figures reflect the number of refugees who had affirmatively registered with UNHCR and who UNHCR believed to still be in the country. The actual totals, including *de facto* and unregistered refugees, could have been more or less than as were counted.

Beginning in June 2018 and formalized by agreement in July, the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments made peace.¹⁰²⁸ The world thrilled to the development, and for that achievement Ethiopia's Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Among the many hopes for the rapprochement were that Isaias – no longer at war – would demobilize his army and end the brutal servitude of its conscripts and of the Eritrean people at large. As the borders opened between the countries, cross-border commerce flowered, and separated families united. A new wave of refugees – Eritrea was still a horrific place to be – freely fled into Tigray. It seemed too good to be true.

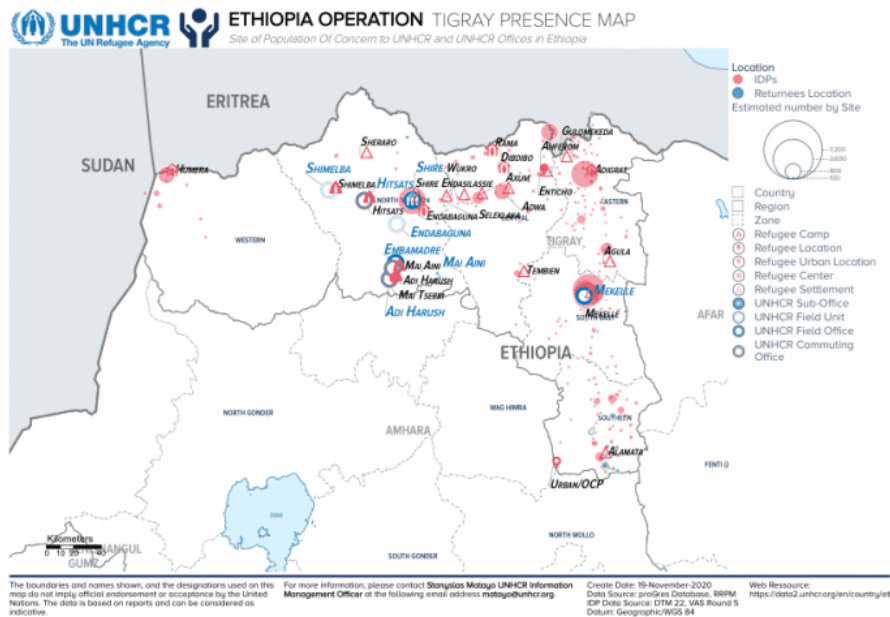
In fact, it was. Within months the borders closed once again. Although various rationales for the closing were circulated – some by the Eritrean government, some by others – the actual reasons were unknown, as were the terms of the peace arrangement. The lockdown on information flow within Eritrea did not abate. Both in the camps and in Addis, Eritreans felt a foreboding, that the rapprochement foretold an ascendancy for Isaias within Ethiopian affairs and a marked peril for themselves. Out of fear, expatriate Eritreans linked to oppositionist activities stopped traveling to Ethiopia. Asylum seekers who faced expulsion from the U.S. likewise rejected opportunities to return to Ethiopia. In April 2020, Ethiopia announced that it would no longer grant *prima facie* refugee status to fleeing Eritreans.¹⁰²⁹ It also made plain that it wished to close the northern camps and relocate the refugees.¹⁰³⁰ It expressly announced that month that it planned to close Hitsats and move its residents to Mai Ayni and Adi Harush, despite the already crowded conditions there and concerns for the spread of the coronavirus in such circumstances.¹⁰³¹ By the summer of 2020, rumors were rife that Abiy and Isaias were plotting to target the refugees. What had begun as the realization of a dream of peace was now looking more like a nightmare.

¹⁰²⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/11/ethiopia-eritrea-border-opens-for-first-time-in-20-years>

¹⁰²⁹ <https://www.eepa.be/?p=3720> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/19/ethiopia-plans-to-close-eritrea-refugee-camp-despite-concerns>

¹⁰³⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210201-eritrea-refugees-caught-in-crossfire-of-ethiopia-s-tigray-war>

¹⁰³¹ <https://www.swisspeace.ch/apropos/peace-for-whom-the-situation-of-eritrea-refugees-in-ethiopia/> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/19/ethiopia-plans-to-close-eritrea-refugee-camp-despite-concerns>



8.3 The war in Tigray begins

The war began on 3 November ¹⁰³² with an attack by Tigrayan forces on multiple bases in Tigray serving the federal government's Northern Command,¹⁰³³ followed by a counter-attack by federal forces on 4 November.

The Ethiopian federal government – which even before the war had been harassing and repressing the press – immediately banned international news outlets from the theater. They remained banned for several months. Unverified propaganda from warring factions filled the information void. As one consequence, the chronology of events that follows in this chapter often reflects piecemeal and sometimes uncorroborated information. Sometimes reports appeared weeks or months after the reported events; sometimes dates and details were murky; sometimes a particular event seemed to originate from multiple sources with somewhat differing detail, and thus to possibly consist of multiple events. Sorting it out was and remains challenging, and almost certainly imperfect. Another consequence of the ban on reliable media coverage were that international actors such as the United Nations, Western governments and major human rights organizations – lacking direct evidence of wrongdoing – were for months reluctant to accuse warring factions of specific human rights abuses.¹⁰³⁴ Nevertheless, for The America Team, which has followed both published and unpublished reports continuously, the overall flow of events has seemed manifest. In this chapter, we have attempted to relate them more

¹⁰³² Some sources report that the attack occurred in the early morning hours of November 4.

¹⁰³³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUKKBN27K0GX> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4_November_Northern_Command_attacks and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Tigray_War#2_November

¹⁰³⁴ It seemed then to The America Team that a perfect means for avoiding accountability for atrocities was to simply ban the press from investigating and reporting on them – shrewd, but not the way that the international accords around human rights were intended to operate.

or less chronologically, and at the same time thematically, in our best attempt at coherence.

□ *The first days.* Already on November 5, UNHCR raised alarms about its ability to provide for the camp refugees.¹⁰³⁵ The federal Ethiopian government cut telecommunications throughout Tigray, and Sudan (possibly with the acquiescence or encouragement of Ethiopia) closed its border, such that camp residents could neither communicate nor flee to the west.¹⁰³⁶ At least one observer, a leading champion of Eritrean refugees, expressed fears that the refugees could become caught in the crossfire, could become pawns of the belligerents, could be driven out of the camps, or could be refouled to Eritrea where they might be arrested, imprisoned and tortured.¹⁰³⁷ Eritrea was quickly suspected of being involved in the war.¹⁰³⁸ By November 11, thousands of refugees – mostly Tigrayans, as opposed to Eritreans – had managed to flee to Sudan, notwithstanding the border closure.¹⁰³⁹ As of November 13, as fighting approached the Shimelba camp, UNHCR was trying to remove the refugees living there to the Hitsats camp or elsewhere.¹⁰⁴⁰

□ *Terrified at the camps.* The war escalated. On November 14, Tigrayan forces launched a number of missiles at Asmara.¹⁰⁴¹ While they inflicted little damage, the pretext was laid for more overt participation by Eritrea in the war. But Eritrea was already reported to have been shelling the city of Humera in the northwest corner of Tigray.¹⁰⁴² The fighting was now reportedly furious across the region. On November 17, UNHCR reported military clashes near one of the camps.¹⁰⁴³ Also on that date, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that UNHCR staff were cutting back their support for the camps due to security issues, and that they were especially concerned for the safety of those in Shimelba.¹⁰⁴⁴ The Red Cross too voiced its concerns for the encamped refugees.¹⁰⁴⁵ Basic sustenance at the camps was imperilled, and fuel for pumping water there was running dangerously low. Across Tigray, the provision of food and medicine and even access to banks were blocked by the federal government. Communications also remained blacked out. Aid workers in the region were reported to be frantic. Their organizations were negotiating with the federal government for a humanitarian corridor through Tigray, but that failed to materialize.¹⁰⁴⁶ Soon international workers for UNHCR and the NGOs withdrew from the camps and from Endabaguna

¹⁰³⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/world/africa/ethiopia-war-tigray.html>

¹⁰³⁶ <https://eritreahub.org/eritrean-refugees-in-tigray-not-in-immediate-danger-from-fighting-but-situation-critical> and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/sudan-closes-border-with-ethiopia-/2033849>

¹⁰³⁷ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/military-offensive-in-tigray-endangers-eritrean-refugees/>

¹⁰³⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/8/fears-on-eritreas-secret-role-in-ethiopias-brewing-civil-war> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/military-offensive-in-tigray-endangers-eritrean-refugees/>

¹⁰³⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/11/5fab9fd4/clashes-ethiopias-tigray-region-force-thousands-flee-sudan.html>

¹⁰⁴⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2020/11/5fae4aec4/humanitarian-crisis-deepens-amid-ongoing-clashes-ethiopias-tigray-region.html>

¹⁰⁴¹ <https://eritreahub.org/missiles-hit-eritrean-capital-asmara-after-tigray-threatens-to-attack-eritrea>

¹⁰⁴² <https://eritreahub.org/missiles-hit-eritrean-capital-asmara-after-tigray-threatens-to-attack-eritrea>

¹⁰⁴³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-un-aid/full-scale-humanitarian-crisis-unfolding-in-ethiopia-u-n-idUSKBN27X14U?il=0>

¹⁰⁴⁴ https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/situation_report_no.3_tigray_humanitarian_update_17_november_2020_final.pdf

¹⁰⁴⁵ <https://eritreahub.org/red-cross-an-update-on-the-situation-in-n-ethiopia-and-a-hotline-for-relatives>

¹⁰⁴⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-refugees.html>

entirely.¹⁰⁴⁷ By November 18, all four camps were reportedly experiencing incidental attacks, although the identity of the attackers was not widely known or immediately revealed.¹⁰⁴⁸ On November 20, UNHCR reported that, having not heard from its local camp staff since November 16, it was “very worried.”¹⁰⁴⁹

□ *Flight to Sudan.* Some of the Eritrean refugees did flee to Sudan.¹⁰⁵⁰ Why had more not done so? No survey of course was taken. But the author of this chapter speculated at the time that, first, the refugees did not fear federal Ethiopian forces, which historically had protected them. In addition, the flight to Sudan through the war zone was precarious, and the border was officially closed. What was more, at the camps in Tigray the refugees enjoyed infrastructure, community organization, international NGO support and ethnic coherence. In Sudan, by contrast – despite meritorious emergency responses by UNHCR and other international actors – at that point there was nothing but chaos. In retrospect, many of the Eritreans may have wished they had decided differently and risked flight to Sudan. But there too, no survey likely has been taken.

□ *The Eritrean military moves in.* By November 18, unconfirmed reports of Eritrean ground forces operating in theater had begun to emerge. Even acting from a distance, Eritrea’s involvement in the war was reported as being multi-form: hosting federal Ethiopian troops who then shelled and attacked Tigray from the north; forcing Eritrean locals – themselves underfed – to feed those Ethiopian troops; treating wounded Ethiopian soldiers at Eritrean medical facilities; and rounding up Eritrean conscripts in apparent preparation for deployment in Tigray.¹⁰⁵¹

□ *The worst unfolds.* At that point, the atrocities against the refugees began to occur. On or around November 19 (as reported much later), Eritrean forces killed some Eritrean refugees in the town of Adigrat and removed others to Eritrea.¹⁰⁵² On November 20, a report appeared that Eritrean refugees were being arrested in Addis and Shimelba.¹⁰⁵³ At approximately that time (also as reported much later), federal Ethiopian forces shot a refugee in Selekleka.¹⁰⁵⁴ On November 20, another report appeared of sweeps of Eritrean oppositionists in Addis – possibly some of them well settled there, and thus not even living as refugees.¹⁰⁵⁵ During a significant fire fight on November 24 at Adi Harush – involving Tigrayan militia, Amhara militia and regular Ethiopian federal forces – several refugees were killed, some of the Tigrayan

¹⁰⁴⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2021/1/6006a31a4/unhcr-finds-dire-need-eritrean-refugee-camps-cut-tigray-conflict.htmlb> and <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/30/Ethiopia-Eritrea-refugee-camps-tigray-cut-off>

¹⁰⁴⁸ https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn_18-November-2020.pdf

¹⁰⁴⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/11/5fb78cec4/urgent-support-needed-help-ethiopian-refugees-reaching-sudan.html>

¹⁰⁵⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/21/concern-grows-for-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-as-tigray-war-rages> and <https://eritreahub.org/new-exile-for-eritrean-refugees-fleeing-ethiopia> and <https://www.voanews.com/africa/rights-groups-sound-alarm-over-safety-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia>

¹⁰⁵¹ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-interferes-in-civil-war-in-tigray-region-of-ethiopia/>

¹⁰⁵² <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-123-09-April-2021.pdf>

¹⁰⁵³ <http://awate.com/ethnic-profiling-tigrayans-ethiopia/>

¹⁰⁵⁴ Reported directly to The America Team, April 12, 2021. (The source for subsequent footnotes referencing such reports is likewise identified as “The America Team.”)

¹⁰⁵⁵ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-5-22-November.docx.pdf>

guards were captured, and other guards fled for their lives.¹⁰⁵⁶ Also on November 24, Eritrean forces were credibly reported to be engaged in heavy ground fighting,¹⁰⁵⁷ as well as the shelling of Tigrayan targets from Eritrea and abductions from Endabaguna.¹⁰⁵⁸ Additional reports of Eritrean ground force activities emerged on November 26.¹⁰⁵⁹ According to one unpublished report, Eritrean forces took over Shimelba for several weeks during this period and disappeared five refugee council leaders; publicly executed five other refugees whom they perceived to be Eritrean oppositionists; and shot seven others dead as they attempted to flee the camp. Later, after Tigrayan forces had re-taken the camp, more refugee residents were killed during fighting between Eritrean and Tigrayan forces.¹⁰⁶⁰ In Hitsats as well, the camp exchanged hands as between Eritrean and Tigrayan forces, now with Tigrayans – as reprisals for the savagery of Eritrean forces elsewhere in Tigray – persecuting, starving, disappearing and killing Eritrean refugees, and with Eritrean forces abducting them and looting.¹⁰⁶¹ On November 27, UNHCR predicted that the four camps would run out of food within days.¹⁰⁶² The same day, an additional attack on Adi Harush was reported, as well as abductions of refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba.¹⁰⁶³ The level of panic, privation and displacement was now intense.¹⁰⁶⁴ The Red Cross reported some 1,000 Eritrean refugees having fled the camps to Tigray's capital, Mekelle.¹⁰⁶⁵

□ *Mass abductions, mass flight, and the killing of aid workers.* In the gravest of developments, on November 28 and the days following, multiple sources reported the abduction by Eritrean forces of thousands of refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba. Those who were able to flee had continued doing so. All humanitarian aid workers by then were long gone from the camps.¹⁰⁶⁶ On December 1, UNHCR itself acknowledged the reports of abductions and conscriptions from the camps,¹⁰⁶⁷ and many refugees were reported to be fleeing from even Adi Harush – one of the southerly (and thus seemingly safer) facilities.¹⁰⁶⁸ On December 2, the flights were reported more categorically: many or most able-bodied residents were escaping

¹⁰⁵⁶ <https://eritreahub.org/update-report-from-adi-harush-refugee-camps-for-eritreans-now-trapped-by-tigray-fighting>; plus The America Team, November 24, 2020

¹⁰⁵⁷ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-armed-forces-fighting-inside-tigray/>

¹⁰⁵⁸ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-6-24-November.pdf>

¹⁰⁵⁹ <https://eritreahub.org/report-of-heavy-eritrean-casualties-in-tigray-war> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-armed-forces-fighting-inside-tigray/>

¹⁰⁶⁰ The America Team, January 24-25, 2020.

¹⁰⁶¹ The America Team, January 28, 2021; also <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210201-eritrean-refugees-caught-in-crossfire-of-ethiopia-s-tigray-war> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-79-08-February-2021.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶² <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2020/11/5fc0b5774/un-high-commissioner-refugees-visits-sudan-new-refugee-arrivals-cross-43000.html>

¹⁰⁶³ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/refugee-camp-in-tigray-attacked-with-artillery/>

¹⁰⁶⁴ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/30/Ethiopia-Eritrea-refugee-camps-tigray-cut-off>

¹⁰⁶⁵ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ethiopia-hospitals-mekelle-struggling-care-wounded-medical-supplies-run-out-red-cross>

¹⁰⁶⁶ <https://eritreahub.org/eritrean-refugees-forcibly-conscripted-from-un-camps-to-fight-in-mekelle> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/ethiopia-thousands-of-eritrean-refugees-abducted-from-tigray-camps-by-eritrean-armed-forces/> and <https://eritreahub.org/mesfin-hagos-eritreans-role-in-ethiopias-conflict-and-the-fate-of-eritrean-refugees> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-22-11-December.pdf> and The America Team, December 3, 2020

¹⁰⁶⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2020/12/5fc60e414/humanitarian-access-urgently-needed-reach-civilians-eritrean-refugees-tigray.html> and <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html>

¹⁰⁶⁸ <https://eritreahub.org/tigray-a-message-received-today-from-an-eritrean-refugee-in-adi-harush-camp>

several camps (probably the northern two), leaving behind mostly elderly and women with young children. Looting at some of the camps, by indeterminate actors, was reported as well.¹⁰⁶⁹ On the same day, several Ethiopian aid workers were reported to have been killed at one of the camps in November.¹⁰⁷⁰ Other reports of aid workers being killed ensued.¹⁰⁷¹ UNHCR acknowledged the same.¹⁰⁷²

□ *The perpetrators.* Who were the perpetrators in these episodes, and how concerted were the offenses? Plainly, Eritrean forces committed the abductions and conscriptions, and just as plainly those operations were purposeful, even strategic. Indeed, by early December, observers were beginning to speculate that Eritrea may have contemplated the abductions before the war began, and that abductees were being forced to fight against Tigrayans at the front.¹⁰⁷³ As for the killings at the camps, some were attributed to identified forces acting deliberately. But others were of more varied or ambiguous nature. Some may have been accidental; others inspired by passion and indiscipline rather than tactic; yet others incidental to concerted criminal activity such as looting or abduction. In late November, Eritrean troops specifically were reported to have killed a number of refugees at Shimelba, possibly as those refugees had attempted to flee (reports varied considerably, ranging from seven to 100 victims).¹⁰⁷⁴ But for the most part, no broad, deliberate massacre of camp residents appeared – in contrast to deliberate massacres that were befalling Tigrayans and other populations elsewhere.

□ *Incidents in the south.* Reportedly, reprisals by some Tigrayans against the refugees – for simply being Eritrean – now manifested themselves in the south. On or around December 2, Tigrayans confiscated agricultural produce headed for Mai Ayni and killed a refugee there.¹⁰⁷⁵ Also on December 2, a refugee at Mai Ayni was killed in Tigrayan-Eritrean crossfire,¹⁰⁷⁶ and more crossfire injuries there were reported on December 5.¹⁰⁷⁷ On December 14, a rape by armed but ununiformed actors at Adi Harush was reported.¹⁰⁷⁸ At this point, the widespread flight from the camps was attributable not only to the abductions by Eritrean forces (in the north) but to fear of Tigrayan cross-fire and vengeance (in the south).¹⁰⁷⁹

□ *The UN stymied.* UNHCR announced on December 2 that it had reached an agreement with the Ethiopian government to resume aid in areas that were under federal control. But as of December 4, the agency was still unable to access the

¹⁰⁶⁹ The America Team, December 2, 2020.

¹⁰⁷⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-aidworkers-idUKKBN28C2MV?edition-redirect=uk>

¹⁰⁷¹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-22-11-December.pdf> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55274583> and https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-24-13-Dec_2020.pdf and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/africa/Ethiopia-Eritrea-Tigray.html>

¹⁰⁷² <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html>

¹⁰⁷³ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-15-03-December.pdf>

¹⁰⁷⁴ The America Team, December 11, 2020, January 4, 2021 and January 10, 2021.

¹⁰⁷⁵ The America Team, December 2, 2020

¹⁰⁷⁶ The America Team, December 2, 2020

¹⁰⁷⁷ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-17-05-December.pdf>

¹⁰⁷⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict/ethiopias-war-scarred-tigray-region-regains-some-services-idUSKBN28Q1N8?il=0>

¹⁰⁷⁹ The America Team, December 2, December 4 and December 7, 2020

refugee camps.¹⁰⁸⁰ Indeed, on December 7, federal forces blocked and shot at a UN security team as it was traveling in the vicinity of Shimelba – a quite extraordinary event.¹⁰⁸¹

□ *At Hitsats and Shimelba: abductions confirmed, vengeance proceeds.* As the weeks passed, reports of Eritrean forces abducting and killing refugees at the two northern camps in November and December became legion,¹⁰⁸² including reports by the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees,¹⁰⁸³ as well as by the UN's Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Eritrea¹⁰⁸⁴ and by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹⁰⁸⁵ One report, on December 9, held that Eritrean forces armed refugees at Hitsats and sent them out to pillage Tigrayan farms.¹⁰⁸⁶ A report that 26 named abductees were seen in Eritrean prisons appeared on March 7.¹⁰⁸⁷ But, as before, not just Eritrean forces were implicated. Reports that several women had been raped by Tigrayan militia as they were fleeing Hitsats appeared on March 9 and March 18.¹⁰⁸⁸ A report that Tigrayan militia killed nine refugees at Hitsats on December 24 appeared much later.¹⁰⁸⁹ Reports of severe privation at the northern camps

¹⁰⁸⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2020/12/5fc9f7b14/unhcr-poised-resume-aid-delivery-displaced-tigray.html> and <https://eritreahub.org/un-says-fighting-continues-in-many-parts-of-tigray-hampering-aid>

¹⁰⁸¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-refugees-idUKKBN28H1A1> and <https://apnews.com/article/africa-ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-f945a81239325a418ee22f123058f39f> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/8/warnings-intensify-as-badly-needed-aid-still-not-reaching-tigray> and <https://apnews.com/article/international-news-coronavirus-pandemic-ethiopia-massacres-united-nations-e6f32b038f6d6a27b6a3be59a9d3343f>

¹⁰⁸² <https://twitter.com/meronina/status/1335158866288537600> and <https://eritreahub.org/refugees-abducted-from-tigray-camps-and-returned-to-eritrea-families-say> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-refugees-in-tigray-continue-to-experience-hunger-attacks-mugging-beatings-and-abductions/> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-20-09-December.pdf> and <https://taz.de/Krieg-in-Aethiopien/!5736994/> and <https://eritreahub.org/more-than-10000-eritrean-refugees-forcibly-returned-to-eritrea-report> and https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-24-13-Dec_2020.pdf and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55277843> and <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/12/16/reports-of-forcible-return-of-eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia-cause-for-alarm> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-30-19-December.docx.pdf> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-32-21-December.docx.pdf> and <https://www.voanews.com/africa/rights-groups-sound-alarm-over-safety-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia> and <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/rights-groups-concerned-over-safety-of-eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia/5709423.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/africa/Ethiopia-Eritrea-Tigray.html> and https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-40-29-December.docx2_.pdf and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-refugees-left-to-starve-for-five-weeks-in-tigray-camp/> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-53-12-January-2021.pdf> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-55-14-January-2021.pdf> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-56-15-January-2021.pdf> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-57-16-January-2021-.pdf> and <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2021/1/29/refugees-international-calls-for-urgent-intervention-in-ethiopia> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-72-31-January-2021-1.pdf> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-refugees-from-two-camps-deported-at-gunpoint-by-eritrean-soldiers-to-the-country-they-fled-from-unarmed-civilians-and-refugees-shot-dead/> and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-91-24-February-2021.pdf> and <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2021/2/24/time-is-running-out-urgent-action-needed-to-address-humanitarian-crisis-in-tigray> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refoulement_of_Eritrean_refugees ; also The America Team, on multiple dates

¹⁰⁸³ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/12/5fd3ab2d4/statement-attributable-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-situation.html> and <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html>

¹⁰⁸⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26795&LangID=E>

¹⁰⁸⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26806&LangID=E>

¹⁰⁸⁶ <https://taz.de/Krieg-in-Aethiopien/!5736994/>

¹⁰⁸⁷ <https://eritreahub.org/the-eritrean-resistance-on-the-state-of-eritrean-troops-inside-tigray>

¹⁰⁸⁸ The America Team, March 9 and March 18, 2020

¹⁰⁸⁹ The America Team, March 23, 2021

continued into December as well,¹⁰⁹⁰ as did additional reports of looting¹⁰⁹¹ and of refugees fleeing the camps.¹⁰⁹²

□ *In Addis.* Contemporaneously, a new alarm sounded. On December 8, reports emerged that refugees who had fled the camps and arrived in Addis were being arrested and detained;¹⁰⁹³ and within days the Ethiopian government was reported to have forcibly transported them back to Adi Harush, to their considerable peril.¹⁰⁹⁴ Some of those detained had also reportedly been threatened with deportation to Eritrea.¹⁰⁹⁵ Some had reportedly been beaten in Addis as they had attempted to flee.¹⁰⁹⁶ In subsequent weeks, the returns to Adi Harush were confirmed; and additional episodes appeared of Eritrean refugees fleeing the camps, being detained in Addis, and then being forcibly returned by federal actors to the camps.¹⁰⁹⁷ Other reports emerged of Eritrean troops being encamped in Addis with the specific mission of rounding up and refouling Eritrean dissidents.¹⁰⁹⁸ On January 7 and 10, Ethiopian authorities were reported to be denying exit permits to Eritrean refugees who had been approved by UNHCR to travel abroad for family reunification – thus trapping them in Ethiopia.¹⁰⁹⁹

□ *At Adi Harush and Mai Ayni.* At length, a small but life-saving bit of relief arrived: on or around December 15, UNHCR managed to deliver food to the southern camps.¹¹⁰⁰ But aid workers had not yet resumed significant operations at those

¹⁰⁹⁰ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-refugees-in-tigray-continue-to-experience-hunger-attacks-mugging-beatings-and-abductions/> and <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict/ethiopias-war-scarred-tigray-region-regains-some-services-idUSKBN2801N8?il=0> and <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-28-17-December.pdf> and <https://www.voanews.com/africa/rights-groups-sound-alarm-over-safety-eritrean-refugees-ethiopia> and <https://eritreahub.org/first-journalist-reports-from-inside-tigray-evidence-of-eritrean-involvement-looting-and-treatment-of-refugees>

¹⁰⁹¹ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-refugees-in-tigray-continue-to-experience-hunger-attacks-mugging-beatings-and-abductions/> and <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-91-24-February-2021.pdf>

¹⁰⁹² <https://eritreahub.org/eritrean-refugees-flee-camps-in-tigray-seeking-safety-in-ethiopian-cities> and <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-19-08-December.pdf> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrea-refugees-in-tigray-continue-to-experience-hunger-attacks-mugging-beatings-and-abductions/> and <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-20-09-December.pdf> and <https://eritreahub.org/first-journalist-reports-from-inside-tigray-evidence-of-eritrean-involvement-looting-and-treatment-of-refugees> and <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-91-24-February-2021.pdf>

¹⁰⁹³ The America Team, December 8 and December 11, 2020; also <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-20-09-December.pdf>

¹⁰⁹⁴ <https://eritreahub.org/photographs-of-eritrean-being-forcibly-returned-to-tigray-war-from-addis> and <https://eritreahub.org/ethiopia-returning-eritrean-refugees-to-tigray-camps-u-n-calls-move-unacceptable> and <https://apnews.com/article/kenya-united-nations-ethiopia-31241097189daa353af87e99945652e3> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/11/un-slams-ethiopia-for-returning-eritrean-refugees-in-tigray> and <https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-refugees-in-ethiopia-human-rights-denied-enduring-assault-gunshot-injuries-arrest-imprisonment-and-deportation/> and <https://eritreahub.org/after-an-epic-journey-eritrean-refugees-who-fled-war-in-tigray-are-back-in-camp-under-armed-guard>

¹⁰⁹⁵ <https://eritreahub.org/hundreds-of-eritrean-refugees-held-at-addis-airport-threatened-with-deportation>

¹⁰⁹⁶ <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-23-12-December.pdf>

¹⁰⁹⁷ The America Team, December 31, 2020 and January 8 and January 24, 2021; also <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-42-31-December-2020.pdf>

¹⁰⁹⁸ The America Team, December 31.

¹⁰⁹⁹ The America Team, January 10, 2021; also <https://www.eepa.be//wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-48-07-January-2021.pdf>

¹¹⁰⁰ <https://eritreahub.org/finally-aid-arrives-at-adi-harush-refugee-camp-tigray> and <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201216-delayed-un-humanitarian-convoys-reach-ethiopia-s-tigray> and <https://www.wfp.org/news/united-nations-agencies-deliver-lifeline-food-assistance-25000-eritrean-refugees-tigray>; also The America Team, December 15, 2020

camps, which remained devoid of security, sanitation items and medical care.¹¹⁰¹ Sickness went untreated, looting by outsiders was continuous.¹¹⁰² In one terrifying and debilitating episode, on or around December 21, five indeterminate assailants at Adi Harush confiscated some 180 to 200 cell phones at gunpoint.¹¹⁰³ On December 24, a man with a saw attacked and injured a refugee at Adi Harush.¹¹⁰⁴ Federal troops detained refugees from Mai Ayni and Adi Harush on or around Christmas Day as they travelled to a nearby town to retrieve money sent by their families to a bank.¹¹⁰⁵ On January 18, incidents of emaciation at the southern camps were reported. (Starvation had appeared across Tigray more generally.)¹¹⁰⁶ Beginning January 23, in multiple episodes, federal troops and militias robbed additional refugees traveling to banks from Adi Harush.¹¹⁰⁷ On January 27, unknown external assailants shot a refugee woman in Adi Harush.¹¹⁰⁸

□ *The destruction of Shimelba and Hitsats.* Conditions in Shimelba and Hitsats remained largely opaque.¹¹⁰⁹ But on December 19, satellite images detected fires at Shimelba.¹¹¹⁰ The next day, a journalist on the ground reported that that camp was empty.¹¹¹¹ As of January 7, humanitarian relief had still not arrived; indeed, there had been no international activity at the northern camps for almost two months: no food, medicine, security.¹¹¹² And then arose one of the starkest crimes of the war. On December 28, The New York Times posted satellite images of scorched earth around Hitsats.¹¹¹³ AFP on January 2 and Bloomberg on January 9 reported that new images showed the systematic and widespread destruction of both camps.¹¹¹⁴ On January 15 and January 19, Al Jazeera reported similarly.¹¹¹⁵ As reported by the Associated Press on January 17, the images now showed even greater devastation.¹¹¹⁶ By January 21, and in the weeks afterwards, published reports – following earlier unpublished ones from well-informed sources – emerged that nothing was left of the two camps, and that all residents had been conscripted, had been forced back to Eritrea or had fled into Tigray, eating leaves for their sustenance.¹¹¹⁷ On February 1,

¹¹⁰¹ The America Team, December 19, 2020 and January 11, 2021

¹¹⁰² The America Team, December 19, 2020 and January 11, 2021

¹¹⁰³ The America Team, December 21, 2020; also <https://hrc-eritrea.org/refugees-in-camp-in-tigray-attacked-and-robbed-by-criminals-the-ethiopian-government-is-doing-nothing-to-protect-them/>

¹¹⁰⁴ The America Team, January 1 and 2, 2021

¹¹⁰⁵ The America Team, December 25, 2020

¹¹⁰⁶ <https://eritrehub.org/extreme-urgent-need-starvation-haunts-ethiopias-tigray>

¹¹⁰⁷ The America Team, January 27 and January 28, 2021

¹¹⁰⁸ The America Team, January 27, 2021

¹¹⁰⁹ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210201-eritrean-refugees-caught-in-crossfire-of-ethiopia-s-tigray-war> and The America Team, December 19, 2020

¹¹¹⁰ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-30-19-December.docx.pdf>

¹¹¹¹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-32-21-December.docx.pdf> and <https://twitter.com/vercrus/status/1340628458062360578?s=11>

¹¹¹² <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%206%20Jan%202021.pdf>

¹¹¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/africa/Ethiopia-Eritrea-Tigray.html>

¹¹¹⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210201-eritrean-refugees-caught-in-crossfire-of-ethiopia-s-tigray-war> and <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/satellites-show-ethiopia-carnage-showing-conflict-continues-1.1545990>

¹¹¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/15/major-violations-of-international-law-at-tigray-refugee-camps-un> and https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2021/1/19/ethiopia-hesitant-to-allow-aid-agencies-into-tigray?twitter_impression=true

¹¹¹⁶ <https://eritrehub.org/as-evidence-of-eritrean-involvement-in-tigray-war-mounts-eritrea-responds-with-denial-and-abuse>

¹¹¹⁷ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-62-21-January-2021.pdf> and

<https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-67-26-January-2021.pdf> and <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93wmbz/refugee-camps-in-ethiopia-appear-to-have-been-systematically-destroyed> and

UNHCR confirmed the mass exodus from the north.¹¹¹⁸ But as of February 2, the northern camps were still inaccessible, even to the UN.¹¹¹⁹

□ *Again at Adi Harush and Mai Ayni.* On January 23 it was reported that Eritrean forces were telling Eritrean refugees in the Sheraro area (that is, likely including some of those who had fled Hitsats and Shimelba) not to attempt to reach the two southern camps – as though wishing to abduct more of them.¹¹²⁰ But as of January 24, the Ethiopian federal government was still returning scattered refugees to the southern camps.¹¹²¹ On January 20-25, a second food shipment by UNHCR and the World Food Program arrived there.¹¹²² On February 1, UNHCR's High Commissioner nevertheless said that conditions in those camps were abysmal, that the residents were living in fear, and that, altogether, some 20,000 refugees were unaccounted for.¹¹²³

□ *Destruction of Shimelba and Hitsats confirmed.* On February 9, the Ethiopian government announced, disingenuously, that it had decided to “close” Shimelba and Hitsats, and that it would seek to bring the refugees scattered about Tigray to the two southern camps.¹¹²⁴ Observers called out the deceit,¹¹²⁵ whereupon, on February 11, Ethiopia's deputy prime minister acknowledged that the camps no longer existed.¹¹²⁶ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a weak but reportedly well-meaning internal body, also acknowledged the destruction of the camps. The Ethiopian government's refugee unit, the Agency for Returnees and Refugee Affairs (ARRA), claimed that the destruction was “overstated.”¹¹²⁷ But on March 18, the first international relief NGO to arrive in Shimelba and Hitsats confirmed their destruction.¹¹²⁸ On March 24, a British news outlet, reporting from the two camps, graphically described the ruin.¹¹²⁹ On March 26, UNHCR reported that it too had reached the camps, and had likewise found them obliterated, with the humanitarian facilities looted and vandalized.¹¹³⁰

<https://africanarguments.org/2021/02/ethiopian-government-must-allow-full-humanitarian-access-to-tigray/> and <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html> and <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/february/buildings-belonging-to-nrc-destroyed-in-ethiopia-tigray/> and <https://www.wionews.com/world/refugee-group-condemns-damage-at-camps-hit-by-tigray-war-362236> and <https://sites.tufts.edu/wp/files/2021/04/Starving-Tigray-report-final.pdf> at page 46

¹¹¹⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html>

¹¹¹⁹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-74-02-February-2021.pdf>

¹¹²⁰ The America Team, January 23, 2021

¹¹²¹ The America Team, January 24, 2021

¹¹²² <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-regional-update-10-ethiopia-situation-tigray-region-13-january-1-february>

¹¹²³ <https://eritreahub.org/un-says-20000-refugees-missing-after-ethiopian-camps-destroyed> and

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/2/6019584e4/remarks-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-press-conference-addis.html>

¹¹²⁴ <https://eritreahub.org/ethiopia-plans-to-close-refugee-camps-in-tigray>

¹¹²⁵ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/the-hidden-truth-of-ethiopia-plan-to-close-two-refugee-camps-in-tigray/>

¹¹²⁶ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-82-11-February-2021.pdf>

¹¹²⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/11/ethiopia-shuts-two-tigray-camps-housing-eritrean-refugees> and <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/403887.aspx>

¹¹²⁸ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/march/ethiopia-hunger-and-disease-rife-among-displaced-as-aid-workers-gain-access-to-new-parts-of-tigray/>

¹¹²⁹ <https://news.sky.com/story/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-the-twisted-joke-of-denial-of-the-violence-is-finally-laid-bare-12254742#>

¹¹³⁰ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/3/605da0564/unhcr-reaches-destroyed-camps-northern-tigray.html> and <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%20%237%20-31Mar21.pdf>

□ *Continuing trauma and fear in the south.* Nevertheless, the federal government's undertaking to concentrate all Eritrean refugees in the two southern camps proceeded, and on February 18 UNHCR announced that it was anticipating receiving some 15,000 refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba there.¹¹³¹ Yet – in addition to the previous Tigrayan attacks on those camps – on February 19 and 20 it was reported that Tigrayans were again threatening the refugees in Adi Harush, and on March 2 that they attacked and looted.¹¹³² A comparable report emerged on February 27 from Mai Ayni, where the intimidation was accompanied by shootings, looting and a mutilation.¹¹³³ Residents of both camps pleaded with UNHCR for protection or evacuation, even as UNHCR was concentrating more Eritrean refugees there. UNHCR, itself under enormous pressure, appeared to have had no solutions to offer them.¹¹³⁴ Still the agency persisted in its mission to support the two camps: on March 31 it reported that it was gradually restoring relief services there.¹¹³⁵ As of April 9, it had received from elsewhere 3,633 Eritrean refugees at Adi Harush and 4,299 at Mai Ayni. (Others among the scattered were being accounted for in Mekelle, Adigrat and Addis.)¹¹³⁶ Yet the camps remained terrifying. On April 8, Adi Harush was attacked, and Eritrean refugees were abducted, at least some of them by Eritrean soldiers.¹¹³⁷ By April 10, Eritrean troops had abducted 17 Eritrean refugees from that camp.¹¹³⁸ In early April, Tigrayan militia seriously wounded a refugee in Mai Ayni.¹¹³⁹

□ *In Addis, again.* On February 17, it was again reported that Eritrean oppositionists who had long resided in Addis and elsewhere in Ethiopia were facing harassment and intimidation at the hands of Eritrean and Ethiopian security operatives.¹¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the arrest of 156 Eritreans in Addis over the past three months was reported on February 22.¹¹⁴¹ On April 16 and 19, Eritrean agents were reported to be sweeping Addis neighborhoods on foot and by car in search of Eritreans, with a view to abducting them.¹¹⁴²

□ *Most recently.*¹¹⁴³ On May 14, OCHA reported that, of the approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees who were previously residing in the northern camps of Hitsats and Shimelba (a number different from the 34,000 cited above in this chapter), UNHCR had now verified some 10,000 refugees who were in Adi Harush, Mai Ayni, Mekelle, Adigrat or Addis Ababa, but that 7,000-10,000 Eritrean refugees were still in hard-to-

¹¹³¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/unhcr-regional-update-11-ethiopia-situation-tigray-region-1-14-february>

¹¹³² The America Team, February 19, February 20 and March 2, 2021

¹¹³³ The America Team, February 27, 2021; also <https://hrc-eritrea.org/brutal-militias-attacked-refugees-in-mai-ayni-camp-in-tigray/>

¹¹³⁴ The America Team, February 27 and March 2, 2021

¹¹³⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%20%237%20-31Mar21.pdf>

¹¹³⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%20%238%20-APR%201-15%202021.pdf>

¹¹³⁷ The America Team, April 8, 2021

¹¹³⁸ The America Team, April 10, 2021

¹¹³⁹ The America Team, April 10, 2021

¹¹⁴⁰ <http://awate.com/eritreans-ethiopia-fear-safety/>

¹¹⁴¹ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-89-22-February-2021.pdf>

¹¹⁴² The America Team, April 16, 2021 and April 19, 2021

¹¹⁴³ As this chapter goes to press in mid-June, 2021

reach areas across the region.¹¹⁴⁴ On June 2, Relief Web posted a UNHCR report to the effect that nearly 8,100 refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba had arrived at Adi Harush and Mai Ayni; that many refugees continued to likely be scattered about Tigray; that many refugees outside of the camps were in need of life-saving assistance; that many refugees were likely moving to Addis, where they felt they would be safer; and that UNHCR was attempting to protect those in Addis.¹¹⁴⁵ On June 6, Relief Web posted another UNHCR report, to the effect that the Eritrean refugee count in Tigray was now 87,420, down from the pre-war count of 96,223; and that essential services, including primary education, had been restored in Mai Ayni and Adi Harush.¹¹⁴⁶ Separately, through mid-June, scattered episodes of Eritrean troops forcibly seizing Eritrean refugees in Tigray and returning them to Eritrea were reported to The America Team, as were episodes of violence by Tigrayans and possibly Eritrean forces against residents of the southern camps.¹¹⁴⁷ On June 29, the abduction, imprisonment and re-conscription of at least some of the refugees from Hitsats and Shimelba who had previously deserted the Eritrean military was confirmed.¹¹⁴⁸

8.4 A Dark Future

□ *Status.* The Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia have become victims of multiple violations of international law. The killing, wounding, robbery and rape of innocent civilians at the hands of organized military actors have amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity, in the view of many observers. The invasion of refugee camps in a neighboring country, the abduction and refoulement of refugees there, and the obliteration of camp facilities – all as perpetrated by the Eritrean military – have abridged multiple principles involving the protection of refugees, such as have rarely occurred anywhere in recent decades. The return of refugees to the unsafe camps in Tigray by the Ethiopian government violates principles of refugee protection as well, as does Ethiopia’s failure to protect the refugees generally.¹¹⁴⁹ On January 28, February 24 and May 12, The United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea expressly called out many of the above activities as potential violations of international principles and legal accords.¹¹⁵⁰

As of this writing, the Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia appear to be trapped there. Those residing in UNHCR-supported camps at Mai Ayni and Adi Harush are highly vulnerable to attacks by both Eritrean forces and Tigrayan militias and individuals. Indeed, the federal government’s determination to concentrate Eritrean refugees in

¹¹⁴⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202014%20May%202021.pdf>

¹¹⁴⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20%28Tigray%29%20Situation%20External%20Update%20%2316%2001-14%20May%202021%20.pdf>

¹¹⁴⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Update%20%2310%20-May21.pdf>

¹¹⁴⁷ The America Team, on multiple dates.

¹¹⁴⁸ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Voices-From-Tigray-Special-Briefing-Webinar-Voices-from-Tigray.pdf> at page 4 and <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Testimonies-Eritrean-Involvement-in-the-War-in-Tigray-2021.pdf> at pages 18 and 24

¹¹⁴⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10>

¹¹⁵⁰ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A_HRC_47_21_E.pdf at pages 13-15

those two camps would appear to make even more of them vulnerable. The camps were never intended to withstand any material invasion, and they are not able to do so. Just as international relief workers fled the camps at the outset of the conflict, they would certainly flee again if circumstances again deteriorated.

Those refugees residing in and around IDP camps in the Sheraro, Shire and Mekelle areas are suffering acute privation, and they may also be vulnerable to attack. Those who had been in Addis when hostilities began, or who subsequently fled from Tigray to Addis, are vulnerable to removal to the refugee camps by the Ethiopian government and to abduction and refoulement by Eritrean security forces. Tigrayans and others who have fled to Sudan could remain there indefinitely – they appear to be barred from re-entering Tigray by Ethiopian and allied forces, who have shot some refugees who have attempted to do so.¹¹⁵¹

As described above, even if any of the refugees, wherever situated, were somehow able to move outside of their current confines, there are no welcoming countries that they could readily access. A fortunate few with international resources will probably escape – for example, to the West. The rest will probably not.

□ *Prospects.* For how long these conditions will last will likely depend on such factors as the status of the war and of the Eritrean-Ethiopian alliance. But, in the view of the author, as long as that alliance continues to any extent, the refugees' prospects for a secure future in Ethiopia remains grim. Even if Eritrean forces were to exit Tigray – as international actors have been demanding for months, and as Abiy has promised – they could seemingly re-enter at any time and pounce upon the refugees. And even short of fresh attacks on the camps by Eritrean forces, Ethiopian and Eritrean security personnel could continue to cherry-pick Eritrean refugees in Addis and elsewhere for refoulement or other harsh actions. Further, even short of such events, the federal government could deny sanctuary to the refugees (with unknowable implications) or otherwise make their lives even more miserable – in an effort to please the Eritrean regime, or otherwise.

One potential rescue operation could consist of removing the refugees to other countries altogether. But as stated above, permanent resettlement of individual refugees in third countries is statistically uncommon. Mass relocation to refugee camps in third countries, alternatively, would require not only host country consent but a major investment in infrastructure, logistics and re-deployment on the part of UNHCR and its partner NGOs. Such a wholesale transplantation would possibly have little precedent; but it perhaps could be justified by the extraordinary and illegal attack on the camps in Tigray by Eritrean forces. A substantially more manageable variation might consist of moving the camps out of Tigray and further south into Ethiopia, rather than into another country. That could be faster, less expensive, and actually welcome by the Ethiopian government – which could tout

¹¹⁵¹https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=69380#:~:text=Eyewitnesses%20in%20the%20border%20area,in%20the%20northern%20Tigray%20Region, and https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tigray-minority-ethnic-cleansing-sudan-world-news-842741eebf9bf0984946619c0fc15023

the move as demonstrating its good faith in protecting the refugees. But, as stated above, it would not achieve full protection, as long as Ethiopia and Eritrea remain allied. Notably, on May 5, UNHCR reported that plans were proceeding to build a new camp in the Amhara region of Ethiopia – directly south of Tigray – to house some 20,000 Eritrean refugees.¹¹⁵² But the number fell far short of the combined Mai Ayni and Adi Harush populations; and the plan did not appear to contemplate protection of either those camps or the new camp from future incursions by Eritrean forces.

To complicate matters, notwithstanding their current peril, some refugees in the camps in Tigray may not relish migrating from their established in-camp communities and their Tigrinya-speaking environs. Some in Addis may hold out hope for the safer, more open and more vital urban life there than can be offered by any refugee camp anywhere. So individual refugees too could have to confront difficult choices, even if choices were offered.

Other means for protecting the refugee camps could include a range of multinational military operations. But any such undertakings would almost certainly necessitate far broader diplomatic considerations and military operations – that is to say, relative to the direct, still raging conflict between Tigrayan forces, on the one hand, and Eritrean, Amhara and federal Ethiopian forces on the other – not just to refugee protection. Of course, a military approach would involve significant economic and strategic costs and risks for the intervening countries – not to mention political risks, both domestic and international.

Still, the potential for such interventions stands as a question. In Bosnia, Liberia, Rwanda and elsewhere in recent decades, international interventions – or earlier interventions than at length eventuated – were widely seen after the fact as having been tragically delinquent. But as compelling as the author finds the question, and as much as he has cogitated upon it, he lacks expertise in that area and thus will stand down from pursuing it here. He instead will conclude simply: by urging that the refugees be moved to safer locales, following due consideration by those with the means to do so, but otherwise expeditiously.

9. Sexual violence in the Tigray conflict

By Sally Keeble¹¹⁵³

Extreme sexual violence is a brutal hallmark of the armed conflict in Tigray. After Ethiopian and Eritrean forces invaded the territory, it quickly became clear that sexual violence was being used as a deliberate act of war, accompanied by ethnically-abusive language indicative of genocide. Acknowledgement by the

¹¹⁵²<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethiopia%20Tigray%20Situation%20External%20Updates%2012%20-%2030%20April%202021.pdf>

¹¹⁵³ Former Labour MP for Northampton North and a Minister in the Department for International Development

international community of the prevalence of the crimes, let alone their genocidal implications, has been slow.

Justice has been completely lacking for Tigrayan survivors of rape, conservatively estimated to number 10,000 in March 2021.¹¹⁵⁴ It's led to a warning from former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, that without action over the abuses in Tigray, the commitments made by the international community to ending sexual violence in conflict are no more than paper promises.¹¹⁵⁵

The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church added his voice to the outrage over the rape of women in Tigray with a message smuggled out of the country on a mobile phone in May 2021.¹¹⁵⁶ The UK bears a particular responsibility for the inertia, as the leader of the global campaign announced in May 2012 at the start of the UK's presidency of the G8.¹¹⁵⁷

The war started when Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, sent the Ethiopian National Defence Force into the Tigray in November 2020 following an attack on its Northern base by forces of the regional government headed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Ethiopian forces were quickly joined by those of Isaias Afwerki, Eritrean President. It was an alliance founded in the peace process between the two countries, for which the Ethiopian leader was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2019. Reports soon surfaced on social media and from refugee camps in Sudan where women arrived telling of horrific sexual violence by the invading forces. The troops' attacks were directed at Tigrayan women and also Eritrean refugees at camps in Tigray. The trickle of stories soon became a torrent, despite the communications blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government.

9.1 A timeline of sexual violence

Between November 2020 and the end of March 2021 the pattern of sexual violence in Tigray became horrifically clear. It would be easy to fill this entire book with the women's stories. The suffering, courage and dignity of all of them is respected. Below are just some of the testimonies that emerged on social media, were reported by NGOs and online agencies, and latterly covered by mainstream media.

□ November 2020: The first accounts of rape reached Tigray Media House¹¹⁵⁸, the major online platform for the Tigrayan community, soon after the fall of the regional capital, Mekelle in November 2020.

¹¹⁵⁴ <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Briefing-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Tigray-8-March-EEPA-Horn-No.-3-08-march-2021FIN.pdf>

¹¹⁵⁵ Violence has become a weapon of war by Helen Clark and Rachel Kyte, Foreign Policy April 27th 2021

¹¹⁵⁶ "Ethiopian Orthodox Church Patriarch blasts Tigray 'genocide'" by Cara Anna, Associated Press carried by Eritrea Hub, May 8th 2021

¹¹⁵⁷ "Foreign Secretary announced UK initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict" News release issued by Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, May 29th 2012.

¹¹⁵⁸ [Tigray Media House | Facebook](#)

□ Between December 2020 and January 2021 numbers rocketed and the first warnings emerged of the scale of the problem. The UN Human Rights Office reported that 136 cases of rape were recorded in hospitals in Mekelle, Ayder, Adigrat and Wukro in the east of Tigray, with warnings that many more attacks went unreported due to stigma attached to the crime, and lack of access to services. The report, released in March 2021 said health¹¹⁵⁹ facilities throughout the region had been systematically destroyed by the invading military.

□ January 2021: Reuters carried a report of a young Tigrayan woman at Hamdayet refugee camp who was treated on arrival by the camp doctor, Tewadrous Tefera Limeuh.¹¹⁶⁰ He was one of the first to identify the genocidal nature of the sexual violence being deployed in his homeland. He treated the young woman for a pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases and guided her to a psychotherapist. The young woman said the soldier who had attacked her at gunpoint had given her a stark choice - to be killed or raped.

□ February 2021: Agence France Presse carried a report of a gang rape of a young woman from Edaga Hamus who was attacked on three separate occasions by groups of Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers. Meanwhile in Mekelle sexual assaults were taking place with impunity and in daylight on students at the Ayder Referral Hospital details of which were included in an extensive report posted in early March by EEPA, the Europe External Programme for Africa, a Belgium-based NGO.¹¹⁶¹

□ March 2021: Agence France Presse posted a lengthy report recording the sadistic nature of the attacks by invading soldiers, including their practice of abducting and detaining Tigrayan women for the purposes of sexual abuse. This included an account¹¹⁶² of a woman abducted off the streets by Ethiopian soldiers, held in a cell in a military camp and raped by groups of up to ten soldiers over a period of two weeks. After being taken back home, she was then raped again, with her three children in the next room. In another incident, an 18-year-old girl from Abiy Addi fought off the soldier trying to rape her and was shot in a hand and leg. Her hand was later amputated at hospital in Mekelle. Images of a hand, accompanying her testimony, went viral.¹¹⁶³

However, it was pictures and a video circulating on social media later that month which came to symbolize the sadistic nature of the sexual abuse by then being deployed wantonly against Tigrayan women. These showed objects being extracted from the genitals of a woman raped multiple times by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers during an 11-day ordeal. The objects included a blood-stained rock, two 3-inch nails, and plastic items.¹¹⁶⁴

¹¹⁵⁹ Ethiopia: Persistent, credible reports of grave human rights violations in Tigray underscore the urgent need for human rights access – Bachelet; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Geneva, March 4th 2021

¹¹⁶⁰ “Choose, I kill you or rape you,” abuse accusations surge in Ethiopia’s war, Reuters, January 25th, 2021

¹¹⁶¹ Situation Report EEPA Horn No 95 02 March 2021, Europe External Programme with Africa, Brussels, March 2021

¹¹⁶² “I don’t feel safe: survivors allege rape by soldiers in Tigray, Agence France Presse March 9th 2021

¹¹⁶³ Ethiopia’s Tigray Crisis: I lost my hand when a soldier tried to rape me, BBC News February 15th 2021

¹¹⁶⁴ Images circulating on social media and later carried under “Health official alleges sexual slavery in Tigray, Reuters, April 15th 2021

A report that identified key features of the campaign of sexual violence in Tigray was published at the end of March by Insecurity Insight, a Swiss-based research institute¹¹⁶⁵. It analysed 36 incidents of sexual violence in Tigray in which 106 girls and women were attacked by at least 144 soldiers. Almost half the perpetrators were reported as being Ethiopian, and a third Eritrean, with the rest Amharan, a combination of Ethiopian and Eritrean, or unidentified. Three quarters of the women said they were raped by several men. The report cites numerous cases of women being raped in front of family members, and of men being told to rape female relatives and beaten or shot if they refused. In one particularly appalling case the report described how six women were gang raped by 30 Eritrean soldiers who joked and took photos during the women's ordeal. One escaped, but was caught again by Eritrean soldiers, stripped, stabbed, injected with drugs and raped for ten days. Her 12-year-old son was shot dead in front of her. A preliminary analysis by the International Rescue Committee of gender-based violence experienced by women in camps for internally-based people set out the continuing problems and erosion of women's safety generally. The Committee's full report is due out in late May.¹¹⁶⁶

By the time mainstream international media started carrying major reports of the sexual violence, the evidence was overwhelming. Nima Elbagir's report on CNN from Hamdayet refugee camp in Sudan at the end of March carried accounts of survivors. It also gave important evidence from the camp's doctor Tedros Tefera who said, "The women that have been raped say that the things that they say to them when they were raping them is that they need to change their identity - to either Amharise them or at least leave their Tigrinya status... and that they've come there to cleanse them... to cleanse the blood line."¹¹⁶⁷ The CNN report showed photographs of the objects the doctor removed from a patient's vagina. However, the reporter said the video, which had clearly caused her distress, was too graphic to be shown on mainstream media. Reports on Channel 4 by Jamal Osman included footage from the clinic for women and children at Mekelle Hospital which had dealt with 260 rape victims¹¹⁶⁸. The nurse in charge was overcome when talking about the experiences of her patients. South Africa's eNCA¹¹⁶⁹ and public broadcaster SABC¹¹⁷⁰ carried reports of men being forced to rape their family members.

9.2 Number of rapes

Figures of numbers of women raped in Tigray range from a low of 108 to a high of more than 10,000. Exact numbers are impossible to verify, although the evidence set out above shows that the use of sexual violence by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces against women in Tigray is endemic.

¹¹⁶⁵ Sexual Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, Insecurity Insight, March 30th 2021
<https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Briefing-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Tigray-8-March-EEPA-Horn-No.-3-08-march-2021FIN.pdf>

¹¹⁶⁶ "Tigray Gender Analysis Key Findings" International Rescue Committee, New York, May 4th 2021

¹¹⁶⁷ "Practically this has been a genocide," CNN March 22nd, 2021

¹¹⁶⁸ Channel 4 News March 19th 2021

¹¹⁶⁹ eNCA news March 27th, 2021

¹¹⁷⁰ SABC News, March 26th, 2021

The low figure comes from the Ethiopian Commission on Human Rights¹¹⁷¹ which reported on 11 February 2021 that it had found 108 rape cases in a handful of clinics over a two-month period; 52 cases in Mekelle, 22 in Adigrat, 7 in Wukro and 27 in Ayder. It admitted actual figures could be higher. Its assessment was conducted in part remotely due to the insecurity and remoteness of the region, made more difficult by the lack of official infrastructure. The Commission did not say who, or what, was behind the number of rapes, although it noted a number of prisoners had recently escaped.

However, these low figures are flatly contradicted by other assessments. Seven hundred and fifty women were raped and admitted to Ayder hospital in Mekelle alone, according to a report by the Australian-based Dedebit media in January 2021. In Adigrat the public hospital reported it had received over 174 rape survivors since the beginning of the war.¹¹⁷² In March, Wafaa Said,¹¹⁷³ the deputy UN aid co-ordinator in Ethiopia, was reported as saying that at least 516 rape cases had been reported by five medical facilities in Mekelle, Adigrat, Wukro, Shire and Axum. However, due to the closure of most health facilities in Tigray, and the stigma associated with rape, she said that the actual numbers would be much higher. In its detailed report of 8 March, quoted above, the EEPA set out a series of reports from aid workers, health facilities and agencies with numbers of women involved. It concluded, “Ten thousand women: this is the conservative estimate of the number of victims of rape in Tigray.” The figure has been widely quoted since with little challenge.

Since then, there have been two very much higher figures – both from impeccable sources – of women affected by the sexual violence in Tigray. The first is from the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Under-Secretary-General Pramila Patten. At a high-level meeting between the US and EU on the eve of the G7 meeting in Cornwall, UK, she said that 22,500 women in Tigray were in need of medical treatment as a result of sexual violence during the conflict. Further information on the meeting is set out below.¹¹⁷⁴

An even higher figure came from the UK during a question-and-answer session on Tigray in the UK Parliament on 14 June¹¹⁷⁵. In response to a question about the sexual violence in Tigray, James Duddridge MP, Africa Minister, said, “We fear that probably at least 26,000 people are likely to require support in the coming months. That is based on UN estimates. It is very difficult to give more precise figures on the types of atrocities and the perpetrators, given that we do not have full access.”

9.3 Distinctive characteristics of sexual violence in the Tigray conflict

¹¹⁷¹ Tigray: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission confirms 108 rape cases, Borkena, February 11th 2021

¹¹⁷² Both these figures were reported in “Gender Based Violence in Tigray” 8th March 2021 Special Briefing No 3 Situation Report EEPA Horn Europe External Programme with Africa, Brussels, March 2021

¹¹⁷³ Men forced to rape family members in Ethiopia’s Tigray, UN says, Reuters, March 26th 2021

¹¹⁷⁴ US – EU roundtable recording [U.S.-EU High-Level Roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray June 10/21 with Nima Elbagir - YouTube](#)

¹¹⁷⁵ [Ethiopia - Monday 14 June 2021 - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)

The cases cited above show the distinctive characteristics that have emerged of the deployment of sexual violence in Tigray. These include, as referenced above:

- Linkage to attacks on Tigrayan men attempting to protect women from assault. EEPA reports people in Axum being shot for attempting to go to the assistance of women raped during the massacre in the town.¹¹⁷⁶
- Kidnap and detention of women and repeated rapes over a period of time as recorded by Agence France Presse.
- Gang rapes by groups of soldiers as recorded by Insecurity Insight.
- Rapes of young girls. CNN reported a doctor who said the youngest person she had treated for rape was eight years old.
- Men forced to rape family members, like the grandfather of the young woman in Abiy Addi who was taken out and shot for refusing to comply with the soldier's instructions to have sex with his granddaughter.
- Use of extreme violence, including the mutilation of women's genitals as reported by CNN and Reuters.
- Specific reference to rape being used to "purify" or "cleanse women," including the case referred to below, widely reported, including by Al-Jazeera. A trenchant description of the genocidal nature of the rape in Tigray came from Cara Anna, in her article published by Associated Press on 7 April. She reports soldiers who told a woman they attacked, "Claim to be Amhara and we'll give you back your house and find you a husband. But if you claim to be Tigrayan, we will come and rape you again."¹¹⁷⁷
- The covering up of crimes by soldiers threatening their victims with further violence if they seek help, and also threatening, or attacking, those who try to help survivors. Such threats, recorded by Insecurity Insight among others, has been linked to the reluctance of women to access medical care.

The sexual violence deployed in Tigray is the worst the humanitarian sector had seen for many years, according to Robert Mardini, director-general of the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross. He said the reports received by his organisation's staff in hospitals and clinics were, "extremely horrific, very shocking.... I haven't heard such terrible accounts for more than two decades in the humanitarian sector,"¹¹⁷⁸ In his denouncement of the sexual violence the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Abune Mathias, said what was happening in Tigray was a genocide and governments of the world knew it. In the article cited above, he described the raping of women as being among the worst of the crimes: "The men who died are better off than them (the women). On Tigray women, they are placing mental scars that will never be erased in their entire lives. Such an injustice has never been done or heard of before. It is very dreadful. Especially the raping of women is slimy and very filthy deed. The taboo of taboos, the despicable of despicable is being committed. Is it really right to commit such bold and filthy deed?"

¹¹⁷⁶ Situation Report EEPA Horn No 73 01 February 2021, Europe External Programme with Africa, Brussels, February 2021

¹¹⁷⁷ "'Leave no Tigrayan:' In Ethiopia an ethnicity is erased." By Cara Anna, Associated Press, April 7th 2021

¹¹⁷⁸ Red Cross condemns 'horrific' sexual violence in Ethiopia's Tigray, Barrons April 22nd 2021

9.4 International law on sexual violence in armed conflict

Rape and other forms of sexual violence in armed conflict are specifically prohibited under international humanitarian law. The broad principle was set out in the Fourth Geneva Convention which says in Article 27 on protection of civilians in times of war that, “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.”

Since then, a complex of statutes and judgements of international tribunals has developed spelling out the details of the provisions and the implications both for civilians and the military, and also setting out a broad definition of sexual violence to include psychological as well as physical abuse. Importantly the provisions apply both in cases of international and internal conflict. A full discussion is contained in the UK government’s “International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict.”¹¹⁷⁹

It sets out three possible approaches to dealing with sexual violence in conflict.

- i) *as a war crime or a violation of the laws and customs of war* - Sexual violence may constitute a war crime if it’s committed against a civilian during an international or internal armed conflict, and associated with the conflict, by a perpetrator who is aware of the context.
- ii) *as a crime against humanity* - This may apply if the sexual violence was committed as part of a widespread or systematic general attack, which could include in the context of Tigray, the massacres, on a civilian population. Again, the perpetrator would need to be aware that he was acting in the context of a conflict.
- iii) *as genocide* – This may apply if there was evidence that the sexual violence formed a constitutive act of genocide, as set out below, and also that it was committed with the intention of destroying in whole or part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.

There’s clear evidence that the sexual violence in Tigray meets the criteria set out in the third of these categories and is genocidal. It meets the criteria of being genocidal in that it has caused bodily and mental harm and prevented births among Tigrayan women. The language reported being used by the attackers also makes it clear that the aim was the destruction of the Tigrayan community. Further evidence of this came in a case of literally searing brutality reported by Al Jazeera in April. A young woman was held and repeatedly raped by Amhara militia who then cauterized her vagina with a hot metal rod. When she finally reached safety, she reported that the soldiers told her, “You did nothing bad to us.... Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.”¹¹⁸⁰

¹¹⁷⁹ International Protocol on the Investigation and Documentation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, First Edition, 2014, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London pages 23 - 25

¹¹⁸⁰ “‘A Tigray womb should never give birth:’ Rape in Tigray” by Lucy Kassa, AlJazeera, April 21st 2021

Woyane, Kassa says, is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, whilst a blog post on the London School of Economics website describes “Death to Woyane,” being used as abusive chant by people in Oromia and Amhara¹¹⁸¹. Norwegian academic, Kjetil Tronvoll, was among the first to make the argument in February 2021.¹¹⁸² His analysis was echoed by Dr Tefera at Hamdayet refugee camp.¹¹⁸³

9.5 UN resolutions on sexual violence in armed conflict

The UN Security Council has passed five resolutions condemning, in trenchant terms, sexual violence in conflict.

The first, in October 2000, was Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security¹¹⁸⁴. It calls on all parties to armed conflict “to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse.” It also says all states must “put an end to impunity and prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls” and that they should “exclude these crimes, where feasible from amnesty provisions.”

Resolution 1820¹¹⁸⁵, passed in 2008, notes that “Women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group”. It demands that all parties to armed conflict stop all acts of sexual violence, including rape, take steps to protect women and girls and take disciplinary action against perpetrators, including military commanders. It then goes on to say that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.” It was in the wake of this resolution, that the UN appointed a Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, to spearhead its work in this area. This is the post currently held by Under-Secretary- General Pramila Patten, whose action on Tigray is set out below

9.6 The international community’s response

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the sexual terror unleashed on women in Tigray, the number of harrowing pictures and testimonies from refugee camps and medical facilities, and the plethora of instruments for enforcement action against perpetrators, the response of the international community has been slow. Any justice for the women has been missing in action.

¹¹⁸¹ The unenviable situation of Tigreans in Ethiopia,” by Blog Editor, London School of Economics, March 28th 2018

¹¹⁸² “The genocidal war on Tigray: An opinion piece by Prof Dr Kjetil Tronvoll” Feb 28th 2021, Tigray Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

¹¹⁸³ “Practically this has been a genocide,” CNN report April 22nd 2021

¹¹⁸⁴ Resolution 1325, United Nations Security Council, New York, October 31st 2000

¹¹⁸⁵ Resolution 1820, United Nations Security Council, New York, June 19th 2008

The first to call out the sexual violence and express her concern about it was Michelle Bachelet, the former president of Chile, and currently UN Commissioner for Human Rights.¹¹⁸⁶ She is an outspoken and long-standing advocate for the role of women in peace processes. In a news conference in Geneva on 9 December 2020, she said her office had corroborated information “of gross human rights violations and abuses – and serious violations of international humanitarian law, including indiscriminate attacks that have resulted in civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects, looting, abductions and sexual violence against women and girls.... There is an urgent need for independent monitoring of the human rights situation in the Tigray region, for all necessary measures to protect civilians, and for accountability for violations.”

The European Union cited sexual violence in Tigray as one of the factors in its decision to postponing aid to Ethiopia. In a blog on 15 January, High Representative Josep Borrell wrote, “The situation on the ground goes well beyond a purely internal ‘law and order’ operation. We receive consistent reports of ethnic-targeted violence, killings, massive looting, rapes, forceful returns of refugees and possible war crimes. The European Union has been and will remain a reliable partner of Ethiopia.... Just in terms of bilateral development cooperation, we have provided € 815 million over the last 7 years (2014-2020). On top of this, Ethiopia is benefiting from € 409 million worth of projects under the EU Trust Fund for Africa, focused mainly on support to refugees and host populations. To help Ethiopia face the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU mobilized €487 million to support the government’s Health Preparedness and Response Plan. And several budget support operations were fast-tracked to enable the country to face the economic strains of the pandemic. However.... under the current circumstances, in particular in the absence of full humanitarian access to all areas of the conflict, we have no alternative but to postpone the planned disbursement of €88 million in budget support.”¹¹⁸⁷

Later in January 2021, a statement of great concern came from the UN’s Pramila Patten.¹¹⁸⁸ She urged all parties to commit to a zero-tolerance policy of all forms of sexual violence. She noted the high number of alleged rapes in Mekelle, and also said there were, “Disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence. Some women have also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities.” “Survival sex” was also documented by the International Rescue Committee’s May 2021 report cited above.

Despite the evidence that the sexual violence was overwhelmingly being committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, she called on all parties to the conflict “to commit to a zero-tolerance policy for crimes of sexual violence, in line with their respective

¹¹⁸⁶ United Nations Geneva, Multi-media newsroom, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, News conference December 9th 2020

¹¹⁸⁷ “We need humanitarian access to Tigray as urgent first step towards peace in Ethiopia” blog post by Josep Borrell January 15th 2021 European Union External Action Service website

¹¹⁸⁸ United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms Pramila Patten urges all parties to prohibit the use of sexual violence and cease hostilities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, Press Statement, UN, New York, 21st January 2021

obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. While taking note of the monitoring and investigation missions recently conducted by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in Western Tigray and the Amhara region, I call on the Government of Ethiopia to further exercise its due diligence obligations to protect all civilians from sexual and other violence, regardless of their ethnic origin and those displaced by conflict, and to promptly allow for an independent inquiry into all allegations of sexual and other forms of violence, to establish the facts and hold perpetrators accountable, provide redress to victims, and prevent further grave violations. My Office and the United Nations system stand ready to support national authorities to put in place rigorous measures to prevent and respond to possible violations.”

The commitment to support the Ethiopian Government’s investigative efforts became something of an elephant trap for the UN. The Ethiopian Government agreed a joint inquiry between its arms-length Human Rights Commission and the UN, which parked the issue while the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops continued their abuse of Tigrayan women. The UN Security Council expressed “deep concern” about the continuing sexual abuse in late April¹¹⁸⁹. There continue to be calls for the UN to launch a fully independent investigation into the sexual violence in Tigray.¹¹⁹⁰

At the end of February, the new US administration under Joe Biden called for Eritrean troop withdrawal, citing their involvement in sexual violence.¹¹⁹¹ “We strongly condemn the killings, forced removals and displacements, sexual assaults, and other extremely serious human rights violations and abuses by several parties that multiple organizations have reported in Tigray. We are also deeply concerned by the worsening humanitarian crisis. The United States has repeatedly engaged the Ethiopian government on the importance of ending the violence, ensuring unhindered humanitarian access to Tigray, and allowing a full, independent, international investigation into all reports of human rights violations, abuses, and atrocities,” the US Department of State said.

Notable by its silence has been the UK government, despite its role in the global campaign against sexual violence in conflict. Former UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, teamed up with Angelina Jolie, Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2012 to launch a global protocol for action published two years later.¹¹⁹² The guidance was updated in 2017¹¹⁹³, and in June 2020 Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Foreign Office Minister and the Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict launched a new code created alongside

¹¹⁸⁹ Security Council Press Statement on Ethiopia UN, New York, 23rd April 2021

¹¹⁹⁰ “Justice will not be served by a joint Ethiopian/UN inquiry into Tigray atrocities,” Ethiopian News by [Getachew Gebrekiros Temare](#) April 12th 2021

¹¹⁹¹ US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Atrocities in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region,” Press Statement, Anthony J Blinken, Secretary of State, February 27th, 2021

¹¹⁹² International Protocol on the Investigation and Documentation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, First Edition, 2014, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

¹¹⁹³ International Protocol on the Investigation and Documentation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Second Edition, 2017, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London

Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad and the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI), to strengthen justice for survivors around the world.”¹¹⁹⁴ Lord Ahmad said, “We are determined to tackle these most abhorrent of crimes. The UK remains committed to take action – action to prevent violence, action to support survivors and tackle the stigma they face – the appalling sense of stigma – and action to hold perpetrators to account.”

Yet the UK Government has said little, let alone taken any action, over sexual violence in Tigray. In March 2021, in response to a question from Sarah Champion MP specifically about sexual violence, the Africa Minister James Duddridge MP said the government would monitor work of the task force set up by the Ethiopian government. The response was later, and exceptionally, corrected to say the UK government had strongly condemned killings of civilians and acts of sexual violence “via a joint statement on Ethiopia with 41 other countries at the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council.”

Later that month, Helen Hayes MP,¹¹⁹⁵ led a parliamentary debate in which she asked the UK Government to, “Specifically ensure that evidence of the widespread use of rape and sexual violence in the Tigray conflict is collated and that the perpetrators are brought to justice in line with UN Security Council resolution 1820. It is wholly unacceptable that soldiers from the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies should be able to rape women with impunity. Equally, it is unacceptable that their commanders-in-chief should permit their forces to use rape as a weapon of war or fail to bring to justice those under their command who commit such crimes.”

Yet the Foreign Office minister who responded to her speech, James Cleverly MP, failed to mention sexual violence at all.

Finally, at the UK International Development Select Committee inquiry into Tigray in April, Africa minister, James Duddridge MP, conceded that there had been rapes. In response to a question about whether he thought rape was being used as a weapon of war, he said, “That is what people are saying is happening, and I have no reason to believe that is wrong. There are verbal accounts of what has happened, but getting the solid evidence is tricky. I know that sexual violence was reported to Christian (McPhail, UK Ambassador to Ethiopia) and his team. Where you draw the line between it being just something that is horrific, where it is targeted at a population and where it becomes a weapon of war.”¹¹⁹⁶

The strongest condemnation yet from the international community came on 22 March 2021. A joint statement was issued by 11 leaders of UN agencies, including Mr. Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for

¹¹⁹⁴ UK launches landmark draft Murad Code to support survivors of conflict-related sexual violence as Covid pandemic increases suffering, press release issued by Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London June 19th 2020

¹¹⁹⁵ Conflict in Tigray Region of Ethiopia, Hansard, Volume 691 debated on March 25th 2021, UK Parliament, London, March 25th 2021

¹¹⁹⁶ International Development Committee Oral evidence: Humanitarian crises monitoring: Ethiopia’s Tigray region, HC 1289 Thursday 18 March 2021

Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Ms. Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Mr. Filippo Grandi, High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO). They said, “Amid a worsening humanitarian situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, reports of indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians, including rape and other horrific forms of sexual violence, continue to surface. This must stop. We call on all State and non-State parties to the conflict to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law; ensure their forces respect and protect civilian populations, particularly women and children, from all human rights abuses; explicitly condemn all sexual violence; and take action to bring perpetrators to justice where abuses do occur.”¹¹⁹⁷

With 70 per cent of health facilities looted, they said only one provided the full range of services for clinical management of rape survivors. Emergency contraception was fully available in less than half of the facilities assessed. An independent investigation into conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray was essential, with the involvement of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They concluded, “It is only with a concerted and comprehensive effort, fully grounded in respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, that the humanitarian response in Tigray will match the scale of humanitarian need, especially for women and children.”

Another unprecedented statement came on 2 April 2 from the G7 foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union. They expressed their grave concern about human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Tigray.¹¹⁹⁸ “We condemn the killing of civilians, sexual and gender-based violence, indiscriminate shelling and the forced displacement of residents of Tigray and Eritrean refugees. All parties must exercise utmost restraint, ensure the protection of civilians and respect human rights and international law.” Finally on 22 April came the UN Security Council’s first – belated – statement on Tigray.¹¹⁹⁹ Earlier attempts to reach a consensus on Tigray had been blocked by China, India and Russia. The statement, drafted by Ireland, came a week after UN aid chief Sir Mark Lowcock briefed the council that the humanitarian situation in Tigray had deteriorated, with people dying of hunger and reports of “gang rape, with multiple men assaulting the victim” sometimes over a period of days, and girls as young as eight being targeted.¹²⁰⁰

The Security Council praised the Ethiopian Government for its efforts to increase humanitarian access. It also welcomed the joint investigation by the OHCHR and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission into alleged human rights violations and

¹¹⁹⁷ Statement on Gender-Based Violence in Tigray region of Ethiopia (New York/Geneva/Washington D.C., 22 March 2021) published by ReliefWeb

¹¹⁹⁸ A statement from the Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the USA and the High Representative of the EU. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, London April 2nd, 2021

¹¹⁹⁹ Security Council Press Statement on Ethiopia UN, New York, 23rd April 2021

¹²⁰⁰ “Sexual violence being used as a weapon of war in Tigray, UN says,” Reuters, April 16th 2021

abuses. However, it also said, “The members of the Security Council expressed their deep concern about allegations of human rights violations and abuses, including reports of sexual violence against women and girls in the Tigray region and called for investigations to find those responsible and bring them to justice...” “The members of the Security Council stressed the need for full compliance with international law.” This was a statement, not a resolution, and was not accompanied by any monitoring or enforcement measures.

The international community gave more attention to Tigray in the run-up to the G7 summit in June in Cornwall, UK. On 10 June 2021, on the eve of the summit the USA and EU held a joint high-level roundtable chaired by Nima Elbagir, the CNN journalist who did much to bring the sexual violence in Tigray to the world’s attention.¹²⁰¹ Pramila Patten, one of the roundtable panelists, said women’s bodies were being used as a battleground in the conflict, and said the world did not need to wait for a full investigation before taking action over the sexual violence.¹²⁰² She said that service providers in Tigray were reporting increased demand for emergency contraception, abortion services, HIV-related services and counselling, all indicative of sexual violence, and said that UNFPA anticipated 22,500 would need such services. In “Their Own Words,” an e-book she was publishing on 17 June 2021, there were reports of a 45-year-old woman gang-raped in Tigray by 16 Eritrean soldiers, and a 32-year-old woman gang-raped in the region on the same day, also by 14 Eritreans. She welcomed the joint investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and UNHCR, which she said had sexual violence as one of its priority areas. She also welcomed prosecutions by the Ethiopian Attorney-General of Ethiopian soldiers. She said she was working with the Ethiopian Minister for Women, Children and Youth Affairs to develop a comprehensive prevention and response strategy. It would need, she said, “political commitment at the highest level” and called on the G7 to assist in delivering this by making the tackling of sexual violence one of the outcomes of its discussions on Tigray.

9.7 The Ethiopian Government’s response

Initially the Ethiopian government’s response was one of denial; that the Eritreans were in Ethiopia at all, that the reports of rape were anything other than falsehoods put about by their opponents, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front. However, in the face of mounting criticism, it has had to backtrack.

The Ethiopian Government first acknowledged the existence, if not the extent of the sexual violence committed by its troops in February 2021. A statement that rapes had happened came from Ethiopia’s Minister of Women, Ms Filsan Abdullahi¹²⁰³ who said, “We have received the report back from our Taskforce team on the ground in the Tigray region, they have unfortunately established rape has taken place

¹²⁰¹ [U.S.-EU High-Level Roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹²⁰² [US - EU roundtable recording U.S.-EU High-Level Roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray June 10/21 with Nima Elbagir - YouTube](#)

¹²⁰³ [Ethiopia confirms widespread rape in conflict hit north, Reuters, February 12th 2021](#)

conclusively and without a doubt. “She said the task force was still processing data to establish the number of victims, and that the government was “strengthening the protection and prevention of gender-based violence against women in the Tigray region.”

In its report cited above, the International Rescue Committee found that there are now fewer social sanctions against the continuing gender-based violence generally in Tigray, limited opportunities for prosecutions and more taboos around women speaking about the attacks on them.

Ethiopian prime Minister Abiy Ahmed conceded in a speech in parliament on 23 March that Eritrean troops were in Ethiopia and that they “may” have been involved in rapes. He also implied that these actions were collateral damage of war. The concession came in the wake of the statement by UN agency chiefs. On 1 April, ahead of the G7 statement, he confirmed that rape had taken place, appearing to implicate his own forces, and pledged that, “Anyone who raped our Tigrayan sisters, anybody who is involved in looting, will be held accountable in a court of law.”¹²⁰⁴

More recently the top public health official in the new government-appointed administration in Tigray, Dr Fasika Amdeselassie, has said that women in Tigray were being kept in “sexual slavery” – some for days or weeks at a time.¹²⁰⁵ “The perpetrators have to be investigated,” she said.

Shortly before the G7, on 3 June, and in the face of mounting concern about the sexual violence in the conflict, the Ethiopian Government held a news conference that dealt specifically with the allegations about the brutality in Tigray.¹²⁰⁶ Attorney-General Gedion Timothewos attributed the killings and sexual violence against civilians to some “bad apples” among the soldiers who had broken the rules of engagement which had been issued to them in a pocketbook. Pressed on the numbers involved, he said there were reports of several hundred sexual assaults reported by the regional authorities. Military authorities had indicated about 30 soldiers were responsible for these. Twenty-five soldiers had been charged by military prosecutors, and four had been convicted. However, he said that there were “exaggerations” and “disinformation” on the subject, and some of the reports should be taken with “a pinch of salt.” Such language goes to the heart of what Pramila Paten described as “A deep-rooted culture of denial of sexual violence.”¹²⁰⁷ The Attorney General did not say what was happening about prosecutions of Eritrean soldiers accused of sexual violence.

9.8 Conclusion - meaningless paper or justice for Tigrayan women?

¹²⁰⁴ CNN report March 23rd 2021

¹²⁰⁵ Mass rape used as weapon six months into war in Ethiopia’s Tigray, Irish Times, Dublin, May 4th 2021

¹²⁰⁶ Tigray Region Press Briefing Update by Dr Gedion Timothewos and Billene Seyoum. - YouTube

¹²⁰⁷ US – EU roundtable recording U.S.-EU High-Level Roundtable on the humanitarian emergency in Tigray June 10/21 with Nima Elbagir - YouTube

While the rhetoric has ramped up, the estimated 26,000 Tigrayan women who have survived rape are still waiting for justice. Helen Clark, former New Zealand Prime Minister and head of the UN's Development Programme has pointed out that to be of any worth, UN resolutions must be backed by action. Writing for Foreign Policy with Rachel Kyte, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy,¹²⁰⁸ she says: "It takes courage for any woman to speak about her experience of rape. In a conservative society such as Ethiopia's, it takes special bravery for a woman to share the most intimate and agonizingly raw details about her ordeal. Every journalist or humanitarian worker who has interviewed these survivors says that the reported cases are only a fraction of the true number.

"The world knows enough to say that war crimes are happening in Tigray. We should not need to wait until we are able to conduct full and thorough investigations before we act to stop rape as a weapon of war. We should not have to count the graves of children before we act to stop starvation crimes. (UN) Resolutions ... are meaningless pieces of paper unless the world acts on their solemn commitments."

As yet, the jury on that is still out.

10. The destruction of Tigray's world important cultural heritage

By Anthony Shaw

In the last six months, Ethiopian government troops and the Eritrean forces in Tigray have repeatedly shelled churches and mosques as well as towns and villages. The shelling has been carried out with total disregard for the buildings or their importance. Many are not simply of local or national importance, but are cultural treasures of global significance. The attacks have been usually accompanied by the killings of dozens of local people as well as priests and deacons and by extensive looting. So deliberate has this been, that it must be considered to be a conscious decision by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, part of a determination to try to destroy the cultural heritage and the social fabric of society. In Tigray, the vast majority of the population is Christian, and so churches have suffered most, but Islam has also been targeted. And this has been done on a scale which suggests this is part of a policy designed to destroy the organisational fabric of civil society, with both priests and imams, as well as other religious devotees, subject to abuse and killing.

In any unregulated conflict situation, which in this case amounts to a civil war coupled with the added involvement of an outside enemy power, it is hardly a surprise that collateral damage occurs, and mistakes happen. Given the quite clearly random nature of some of the artillery bombardments that have been taking place since early November, some of the damage and casualties may be the result of unintended damage. But the sheer number of churches and mosques that have been

¹²⁰⁸ Violence has become a weapon of war by Helen Clark and Rachel Kyte, Foreign Policy April 27th 2021

damaged, manuscripts looted and the deliberate shelling of famous sites as well as the extensive massacres of people and religious personnel indicates something more.

It is, in fact, clear that the Federal troops, and the Eritrean forces which now make up most of the troops fighting in Tigray, have been specifically instructed to ignore any considerations of civilized behaviour. The numerous, detailed, eye-witness accounts of the killings and destruction that have been carried out, and the obstinate and determined refusal to open any dialogue or discussions, or to try to bring an end to the abuses clearly being perpetrated across the Tigray region, suggest the aim is the destruction of a people rather than any simple attempt to carry out a 'law enforcement' operation to arrest the few leaders of a political organisation. Certainly, activities since November have been grossly in excess of what would be required for any rational 'law enforcement'. And while the Federal government has claimed that Tigrayan fighters have been hiding in or using religious sites, and this is why they have been attacked, it has produced no evidence in support of its claims.

In any deeply religious society such as rural Tigray, whether among Christian or Muslim believers, the general feelings of insecurity and trauma induced by ongoing conflict will be massively increased by attacks on the examples of stability and continuity to be seen in religion, and in the churches and mosques to be found across the region. Attacking these massively underlines the scale and intent of the intended destruction. Indeed, as the conflict has continued and the reports and evidence of devastation, looting and killing have multiplied, with the Eritrean forces, in particular, behaving like an occupying army bent on annihilating its enemy, it seems that the aims appear to include obliteration of the Tigray region, of its people, its resources and its cultural heritage. The region's religious traditions, religious buildings, manuscripts and monuments, have been a major subject of attack, and in some cases of wanton destruction and/or extensive plundering and looting.

And there is much to loot and destroy. The Tigray region was the centre of a Pre-Aksumite civilisation, which dates to more than 3000 years ago. This area, together with part of neighbouring Eritrea, was the centre of the Aksumite empire between the 1st and 7th centuries CE, one of the great empires of Late Antiquity in the Middle East, along with the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. The Aksumite King Ezana converted to Christianity in the 4th century CE and Tigray is home to the earliest Christian churches in Ethiopia, with buildings certainly dating back to the 6th-7th centuries and probably earlier. Ethiopia was one of the earliest countries to adopt Christianity. Indeed, the region is home to the world's greatest collection of rock churches, around 125 of the 200 or so known in Ethiopia are to be found in Tigray. But Tigray religious connections are not confined to Christianity. Islam is the second largest religion in Ethiopia. The remains of one of the earliest Muslim settlements in Africa including a mosque is found in the modern town of Negash in Tigray, dating to the 7th century CE. Traditional history recounts that some early followers of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, including a daughter and son-in-law, faced persecution and were forced to flee. They were granted refuge

by a Christian Aksumite King who protected them from those in pursuit, as explained below. Aksum also has extensive links with the third of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, through the story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant, believed by many to rest in Aksum today. Pre-Aksumite remains, at Yeha and at nearby remains at Beta Samati, take Tigray, and Ethiopia's political history, back for at least another millennium.

Home to hundreds of religious and historic sites and thousands of cultural objects, significant to Tigrayans, the Tigray region is indeed steeped in history, but it is, of course, the history of Ethiopia as well as of Tigray, and of Africa. Tigray has some of the earliest standing monuments in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as artefacts and sites that provide material evidence for the history of Christianity and Islam and Judaism in Africa. Copies of Jewish and Christian biblical texts, some richly illustrated, and others found nowhere else, as well as some of the earliest of Christian buildings, shed light on the religious practices and Christianisation of northeast Africa and on cultural exchanges with the Mediterranean world over many centuries. The empire of Aksum provided the link between the Roman world and the eastern civilizations of India and China. Medieval wall paintings, rock-hewn churches and other material objects show the way Christian Ethiopians expressed their identity and beliefs over many centuries while also being prepared to accept ideas from Islamic and other communities. Paintings and manuscripts, many of which still remain unexamined by the outside world, provide evidence of the spiritual devotion, theological erudition and the elegance of generations of holiness.

The city of Aksum was recognised in 1980 by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site¹²⁰⁹ due to its cultural importance as the centre of the Aksumite empire, one of the four great powers of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world of the 3-7th centuries along with the Roman and Byzantine empires and the Sassanid empire in Iran. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) claims the Ark of the Covenant which contains the Tablets on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed is housed in a small chapel next to the 17th century Cathedral of St Mary of Zion and the new Cathedral completed in the early 1960s under Emperor Haile Selassie. Ethiopian tradition identifies Aksum as the city from which the Queen of Sheba journeyed to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem. Aksum is considered to be the holiest city in Ethiopia and is an important site of pilgrimage. "If you attack Aksum, you attack first of all the identity of Orthodox Tigrayans but also of all Ethiopian Orthodox Christians," (Dr. Wolbert Smidt).¹²¹⁰ Predominate among the archaeological remains are the giant carved stelae which now include the 24-metre-high Obelisk of Aksum, taken to Rome in 1937 and finally returned and reinstalled in 2008, King Ezana's stelae, and the collapsed and broken 33m Giant Stelae. Three others measure over 15m in height. Other attractions in Aksum include the Ezana stone, an account of his victories written in Sabea, Ge-ez and Greek, the Queen of Sheba's Bath (a reservoir), the remains of the 4th century CE Ta'akha Maryam and 6th

¹²⁰⁹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/15/>

¹²¹⁰ Associated Press, 18 February 2021

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ethiopia-axum-massacre-church-mary-zion-ark-covenant-tigray.html>

century CE Dungur palaces and various other remains scattered throughout the town as well as its archaeological and ethnographic museums.

Destruction of cultural sites and remains carried out in the name of extremism has been a characteristic of many of the recent conflicts across the Middle East. Some has also appeared to be casually destructive. In Tigray, churches have been shelled on days when large crowds could be expected at religious festivals; on other occasions, churches have been damaged as part of apparently random bombardment of towns and villages, designed to cause fear in general or encourage alarm or flight to allow for pillaging. Bombing attacks must have been more deliberate. Destruction and damage has not been limited to churches. Mosques have also been targeted, including the al-Nejashi mosque.¹²¹¹ Looting has been reported in many places. There are museums at Aksum, Wukro, Adigrat and Yeha in Tigray, and all four places have been the scene of fighting and of damage. The Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia has reported that at least one of these has been partly damaged and plundered. The full extent of damage to the heritage of Tigray, and thus of Ethiopia and indeed of Africa, remains uncertain because of the continued fighting and the Ethiopian government's refusal to allow full access for journalists and others even into areas which they claim are under government control. What is, however, clear is that the damage is extensive and the threat to the heritage of Ethiopia, and to the 'cultural property' of Ethiopia, and of Eritrea and especially of the Tigray region, is enough to alarm researchers and scholars across the world.

Protection of these assets has long been the responsibility of local communities, but sites are administrated by the Tigray Bureau of Culture and Tourism, who are now overwhelmed with cases of heritage destruction. Under current circumstances when state security institutions are deeply involved in conflict, and an outside military force is also participating, their ability to preserve these treasures becomes limited. The safety of a major part of Ethiopia's cultural heritage is now in danger of destruction or removal. Given the disregard by Eritrea's government for all diplomatic and intellectual norms, the current evidence of widespread looting by its troops, and the apparent determination of its President to destroy the region, the possibility that much of the cultural heritage of Tigray, and therefore of Ethiopia, is in the process of being stolen or destroyed appears high. Much of it may well end up falling into the hands of international criminals and being sold abroad.

While Eritrea appears to be the more active participant in the looting of manuscripts as well as of Tigray more generally, these activities are, ironically, also destroying much of Eritrea's own heritage with damage to the historic remains of Aksumite civilisation and pre-Aksumite remains, as well as early Christian and Muslim religious sites. The early history of Tigray, of Aksum, and of all Ethiopian history prior to the 1880s is also part of the pre-colonial history of Eritrea. The central areas of what is now Eritrea were consistently part of the different polities that held power in northern Ethiopia from the 1st millennium BCE. Half the population of Eritrea today are, of course, Tigrinya speakers. The destruction of the cultural heritage of

¹²¹¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ethiopia-tigray-nejashi-mosque-conflict-damage>

Tigray of course destroys a past in which many Eritreans are directly involved.

10.1 Attacks on Churches and Mosques

As Ethiopian and Eritrean troops advanced towards Mekelle in the second half of November, they shelled most of the towns along the main roads, irrespective of whether they faced any resistance from Tigrayan forces. There was fighting in some places but many towns were abandoned by Tigrayan forces before their arrival. At Negash, the al-Nejashi mosque was badly damaged with both the main building and minaret were directly hit by artillery fire. These are some of the most important parts of the mosque, whose foundations are old, even though parts have been rebuilt repeatedly. Government media later claimed Tigrayan fighters had dug trenches near the mosque in order to resist their advance, implying that this would make the mosque a legitimate target. Apart from the fact that this does not provide any excuse for shelling such a building, locals are insistent that by the time Eritrean and Ethiopian troops approached the town, Tigrayan fighters had long gone. Certainly, there was no attempt to defend either the town nor any response to the preliminary shelling. The compound of the mosque was subsequently looted extensively by Eritrean troops.¹²¹² A church in the area, St. Amanuel, was also hit by seventeen shells from tanks and badly damaged.¹²¹³

Al-Nejashi is one of the major heritage sites of Tigray and holds an important place in Islamic history. Located near the town of Wukro, it was the first mosque to be built in Africa and the second in the world. It was founded in 612 CE by some of the earliest followers of the Prophet who fled from persecution by the ruling Quraysh tribe in Mecca and found safe haven in Aksum. The group included the Prophet's daughter Ruqayyusa and her husband Uthman, and the mosque was established with the consent of the then Negus of Aksum, Armah (Ashama ibn Abjar). Some of the group remained in Ethiopia and the mosque contains the tombs of 15 of the companions of the prophet. Restoration of the mosque by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency TIKA was only completed three years ago.

Middle East Eye (MEE) investigated the reports of the damage and the casualties.¹²¹⁴ It reported that artefacts, including religious manuscripts, books and letters dating as far back as the seventh century, were looted, and a shrine holding the remains of followers of the Prophet Muhammad in the Mosque was also damaged. A representative of the regional International Association of Muslims in Tigray, Ahmed Siraj, said Eritrean soldiers killed civilians trying to prevent pillaging; some reports have put the number at over 80. The Association has also reported attacks on another historic mosque near the town of Nebelet: "Eritrean soldiers entered the mosque, shot dead two brothers who were guardians of the mosque, then looted it of its valuables before hitting it with heavy weapons and significantly damaging it." A mosque in Adigrat was also damaged. The damage to these mosques underlined

¹²¹² 'No more sacred places': Heritage sites under siege in Tigray conflict 30.4.2021)

¹²¹³ [https://www.eepa.be/Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 81 10.2.2021](https://www.eepa.be/Situation%20Report%20EEPA%20Horn%20No.%2081%2010.2.2021)

¹²¹⁴ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ethiopia-tigray-nejashi-mosque-conflict-damage>

that the attacks have not been confined to Christian churches but have been aimed more widely at religious sites.

Another city which suffered random shelling and extensive killing was Aksum, the centre of the first Ethiopian state, with its 16th century CE Cathedral of St. Mary, the place of coronation of Ethiopian emperors, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the home of the Ark of the Covenant. Exactly what happened in Aksum between 19-29 November is still a matter of uncertainty, but it does seem clear that dozens, if not hundreds, of civilians were deliberately killed on 28-29 November by Eritrean troops, possibly in supposed retaliation for some earlier resistance to their presence. In their reports on what happened, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International blamed Eritrean troops and said mass killing left hundreds dead, mostly civilians.

¹²¹⁵ Amnesty said: "Over an approximately 24-hour period on 28-29 November, Eritrean soldiers deliberately shot civilians on the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, extra-judicially executing men and boys". Both suggested the number of dead ran into several hundred. On 10 May, a report from the Federal Attorney-general said the Eritrean forces had killed 93 people but this had occurred during "heavy fighting" against forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). ¹²¹⁶

One eye witness claimed that the first attack on Aksum came on 19 November with heavy and random shelling by Ethiopian and Eritrean artillery, followed by the arrival of Ethiopian and Eritrean troops after a two-day battle at Selekleka. There were no Tigrayan forces in the city. When the Ethiopian troops left after a week, some Eritrean troops remained and set up a base on the edge of the city on 27 November. They started patrolling the city and the surrounding area. Some fighting broke out the next day when some local militia and youths from the city attacked the Eritrean force. Later in the day, large numbers of Eritrean reinforcements arrived, some in Ethiopian army uniforms. They began shooting at any civilians around on the streets.

The witness said: "It is hard to estimate the exact number of people shot dead by the time the one-day battle was over, except that the number of corpses buried at the church of St. Mary of Zion was claimed to be around 720." The next day killing continued and was accompanied by extensive looting of houses with truckloads of goods being taken away. The looting went on for three days. ¹²¹⁷ How much damage was caused to the stelae, obelisks, monuments and other historic remains scattered around the city is still unknown. Another concern is the state of the Aksum Museum, its exhibits and storerooms in which are housed archaeological materials excavated since the early 1990s when large scale archaeological projects resumed in the Aksum area. It is not clear what has happened to these treasures. Much of the killing is said to have taken place in the compound of the Cathedral, where people

¹²¹⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-Aksum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/>; <https://eritreahub.org/human-rights-watch-the-full-report-on-the-Aksum-massacre>

¹²¹⁶ <https://wailtinfo.com/attorney-general-discloses-report-regarding-criminal-investigation-on-crimes-acted-in-Aksum/>

¹²¹⁷ <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/03/26/unholy-deeds-in-tigrays-holy-city/>

had gathered to prevent any attempt to remove the Ark which is kept in a chapel in the Cathedral compound. There were rumours that Eritrean troops planned to take it to Eritrea or that it was going to be taken to the Amhara region, for 'safety'.

According to eye witnesses Debre Damo, one of the oldest and best-known monasteries in Ethiopia with a church certainly dating back to the 6th century CE was the target of shelling by Eritrean troops on 11 January. The accounts of the shelling suggest the bombardment was not aimed at any specific target in the monastery. It came from three different places and according to witnesses while "the upper part of the monastery was hit by more than 18 shells, and a total 28 shells landed in the monastery, another 100 shells fell around the base of the sheer-sided *amba*, [mountain], on which the monastery stands, without causing casualties." The shelling is said to have lasted nine hours in all. One monk was killed and 26 monastic cells/houses destroyed. Eritrean troops subsequently searched the monastery on two occasions, on January 12 and 14, taking significant quantity of materials away.¹²¹⁸ Debre Damo hosts a significant collection of manuscripts and cultural objects. The soldiers have been quoted as telling the monks the shelling had taken place because they had been told TPLF leaders had taken refuge there.

Debre Damo is close to the border with Eritrea and a number of other churches in the border areas have been damaged, some severely. The newly constructed Aba Zewengel Church of Maebino Holy Cross monastery was reported demolished; and Cherkos church in Zalambessa suffered at least one direct hit from artillery fire.

The interruptions in communications and the continued difficulties of access to large areas of Tigray has meant it remains difficult to confirm the reports of destruction and death. Details of the numbers killed, of the damage caused to churches and mosques or of the looting that has taken place, often remain uncertain even if in the last few months more and more evidence has accumulated of the destruction of heritage assets. The damage to buildings and the numbers and identification of those killed are steadily being revealed and documented.

10.2 Other massacres/damage to churches and religious sites

Damage to churches and associated killings has clearly been quite deliberate on occasions, and it appears that on some occasions Ethiopian and Eritrean troops chose dates on which such activity would have the maximum impact in terms of causing casualties. The annual feast day of the church at the Medhane Alem church of Gu'itelo (Eastern Tigray) was 5 January. On that day, after shelling the church, Eritrean troops arrived, forced the members of the congregation still present to line up and then shot them. Four of the priests were shot and killed at the residence of the church teacher. In addition to the damage at the church, the troops killed a total of 30 civilians as well as another 16 people in the adjacent villages of Firedashum and Ara'iro, including 6 priests and 3 deacons.¹²¹⁹

¹²¹⁸ <https://www.eepa.be/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-85-16-February-2021.pdf>

¹²¹⁹ https://wiki2.org/en/Medhane-Alem_church_massacre_in_Gu%27itelo

Dengelat is close to the town of Edga Hamus, on the road between Adigrat and Wukro. Its rock church of Maryam Dengelat in the cliffs above the village was reopened with the help of Italian mountaineers and re-consecrated by the Bishop of Adigrat only two years ago. The route to the church had been closed by a rock fall in the 17th century when the path was swept away. A new church was built near the village. Eritrean troops arrived there during the feast of Tsion Mariam and opened fire while hundreds were celebrating mass. Many were killed in the church compound; others tried to escape up the cliffs; the troops followed spraying the mountainside with bullets.¹²²⁰ At least a hundred people died then and more over the next three days before the soldiers left. Many of those killed included people who had fled a few days earlier from fighting near Adigrat

The church of Medhanie Alem Gu'etelo in Gulomekeda (Eastern Tigray) was shelled by Eritrean artillery on the occasion of the annual Feast of Jesus on 5 January. During a four-hour bombardment, at least thirteen shells hit the church and its compound, seriously damaging the church, shattering its windows and roof, and killing many of the congregation. When the Eritrean troops reached the church, they lined up the remaining congregants and shot them. They also killed four of the priests, altogether a total of 28 people, including nine women.¹²²¹

Another massacre occurred on 5-6 January near the monastery of Debre Abay. The nearby small town of Mai Hrmaz was shelled before Ethiopian and Eritrean troops went on a killing spree, reportedly leaving more than a hundred dead.¹²²² Whether any of those killed included people from the monastery, or whether the monastery itself suffered attack is unclear. Debre Abay is a famous monastery, founded in the 14th century CE with a notable reputation for learning, and supporting over a hundred monks and scholars. The building was bombed by the Italians in 1935 but rebuilt in the 1950s.

The Freedom of Religion or Belief blog for Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in February called for swift international action to save the region of Tigray. It spoke of confirmed massacres of Tigrayans and the deaths of 'significant numbers' of clergy and worshippers. It said it had reports of 154 deaths, including the murders of around 48 Orthodox priests in a church in Adi Fetaw, close to the Eritrean border, and of 24 priests in Edaga Arbi. It believed the attacks on churches appear to be timed to coincide with annual religious festivals, possibly to inflict maximum casualties. It quoted a Tigrayan official: "They kill whomever they find in whichever village they get in. In the village I was in yesterday – it's a small village – they killed 21 people, out of which seven of them were priests."¹²²³ CSW's Head of Advocacy said: "The extensive destruction and looting, including of sites of historical religious importance that generate income from tourism, point to a deliberate effort to deprive the region of every means of survival and recovery."

¹²²⁰ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/26/africa/ethiopia-tigray-dengelat-massacre-intl/index.html>

¹²²¹ <https://addisabram.wordpress.com/2021/05/05/tigray-genocide-massacre-in-the-church-of-medhanie-alem-guetelo-on-the-parishes-most-important-day-of-the-year-the-festival-of-jesus-the-savior-of-guetelo/>

¹²²² <https://tghat.com/2021/02/08/a-graphic-footage-of-the-debre-abay-massacre-what-do-we-know-about-it/>

¹²²³ <https://forbinfull.org/2021/02/04/the-intl-community-must-act-swiftly-to-save-tigray-region/> 4.2.2021

A letter obtained by the UK Daily Telegraph newspaper in May, apparently from EOTC members in Tigray and addressed to the Holy Synod in Addis Ababa, claimed that at least 78 “priests, deacons, choristers, and monks” had been massacred in one zone of Tigray alone in the last five months.¹²²⁴ The newspaper’s report quoted other priests who thought the numbers could be much higher. It mentioned the churches of Gergera Maryam, Adi’Zeban Karagiorgis, Kidanemihret Bosa, Taksa and the monastery of Da Abune Ayzgi as some of the churches where clergy had been killed. Witnesses have claimed Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers specifically target the churches on saint’s days in order to find larger numbers to kill. On 9 January, at a celebration of the birth of the Virgin Mary at Adi’Zeban Karagiorgis, eight Ethiopian soldiers arrived, took out 12 deacons between the ages of 15 and 20 and shot them.; at Gergera Maryam, a dozen Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers entered the church where six priests were praying. All six were shot, one survived.¹²²⁵

A partial list of major sacred sites that had been attacked, drawn up in February, listed four churches (Cherkos in Zalembeza, burnt down by Eritrean troops; Inda Mariam and Inda Abune Aregawi, at Adi Dairo, both shelled; and Medhanie Alem Gu’etelo; three monasteries (Yeha, looted by Eritrean troops; Debra Damo, shelled and looted by Eritrean troops; and Qheretsa Mariam); Samre, bombed by the Ethiopian air force; and the Al-Nejashi mosque, Wukro, shelled and looted by Eritrean forces.¹²²⁶ All were significant historic and religious centres.

These attacks emphasize that any right of sanctuary, a long-held custom in Ethiopia, is no longer acceptable to the armed forces of either Ethiopia or of Eritrea. At one level, much of the shelling of towns and villages appears to be arbitrary, as in the urban areas of Shire, Humera or Mekelle which Human Rights Watch, in a report in February this year, described as ‘indiscriminate’, though it emphasized that this was also a clear violation of the laws of war.¹²²⁷ At the same time, the repeated coincidence of the shelling of churches and other religious sites, including mosques, on holy days when large crowds might be expected, underlines deliberation and intent.

10.3 Attacks on the ‘Sacred Landscapes’ and ‘Cultural Heritage’ of Tigray’

There is no doubt that the conflict, and the way President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy have conducted it, has damaged or threatened to damage churches and mosques, as well as archaeological remains, buildings, inscriptions, manuscripts and documents. The reported behaviour of both Ethiopian and Eritrean troops suggest that President Isaias and Prime Minister Abiy have, quite deliberately, decided to destroy some of the earliest records of both Christianity and Islam in Africa. Indeed,

¹²²⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/least-78-priests-massacred-one-zone-tigray-leaked-letter-claims/>

¹²²⁵ [https://www.eepa.be/ Situation Report EEPA Horn No.145. 11.5.2021](https://www.eepa.be/Situation%20Report%20EEPA%20Horn%20No.145.11.5.2021)

¹²²⁶ <https://meketetigray.uk/2021/02/22/list-of-facilities-industries-buildings-cultural-heritages-and-infrastructures-destroyed-looted-burned-or-damaged-by-ethiopian-army-eritrean-troops-and-amhara-forces-in-the-war-on-tigray/>

¹²²⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/ethiopia-unlawful-shelling-tigray-urban-areas>

it appears that the President of Eritrea, in his petulant determination to take revenge for military defeat in a war he himself instigated twenty years ago, and a Prime Minister of Ethiopia, aiming to ensure the removal of any critics of his policies of centralisation, acting together in an almost unparalleled demonstration of barbarism and stupidity, have decided to orchestrate the destruction of much of the major leading elements of the cultural heritage of Tigray, ignoring their value to Ethiopia, to Eritrea or to the world. Their targets have included: the al-Najashi mosque, Aksum, Debra Damo, the 7th century BCE temple at Yeha, the oldest free-standing stone structure in sub-Saharan Africa; the greatest collection of rock churches in the world, over 120 ranging from the 4th to the 15th centuries CE; and some of the earliest Christian and Muslim manuscripts. Aksum is already a UNESCO World Heritage site, but Yeha and three groups of the rock churches, those in the Gheralta, Tembien and Atsbi, are all under consideration as World Heritage sites.

The cultural heritage, now being destroyed in Tigray, is irreplaceable. Churches, monasteries and mosques have been damaged by the shelling or bombing of Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Historical manuscripts have been looted by Eritrean troops. One early list of damaged religious sites and of the numbers of killed priests and monks included 14 churches and four monasteries damaged by bombing and artillery fire, as well as looting by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops since the start of the war. The number continues to rise.

The churches of Tigray have attracted pilgrims and worshippers for centuries. With their “stunning murals with depictions of Ethiopian history”, they have in recent years become a major international tourist attraction. They range from monolithic to rock-hewn and built structures, and the earliest date back to the 5th century CE or even earlier. Tigray is home to the largest collection of medieval and early medieval rock churches in the world and there has been repeated military activity near or around many of the most famous churches. The town of Hawzien, for example, has been a major centre for tourism in the Gheralta mountains where some of the most spectacular rock churches lie, and it has been attacked or occupied on several occasions by Eritrean or Ethiopian forces.

In February 2018, the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Ethiopia submitted its nominations for the ‘Sacred Landscapes of Tigray’ to the tentative list of World Heritage Sites in the cultural category.¹²²⁸ In its application, the Ministry said: “Tigray is home to 121 rock-hewn churches, believed to represent the single largest group of rock-hewn architecture in the world. Eighty of these churches, dating from the 5th to 14th centuries AD, as well as a small number of masonry-and-timber built churches, which include some of the oldest timber structures surviving worldwide (6th – 10th centuries AD), are located in the Sacred Landscapes of Tigray.” It added that a significant number of churches had wall-paintings and many retained treasures in the form of manuscripts, portable paintings and liturgical objects, including examples which had survived from the Middle Ages.

¹²²⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6301/>

The Ministry's nomination covered three separate areas in eastern Tigray: 'The Sacred Landscape of Gheralta'; 'The Sacred Landscape of Tembien'; and 'The Sacred Landscape of Atsbi'.¹²²⁹

Gheralta includes twenty-eight rock-hewn monuments carved into the sandstone were excavated at different dates from the 5th – 14th centuries CE. They are located in a "spectacular landscape of great scenic beauty, access to many of them is extremely challenging and, in some cases, involves climbing vertical surfaces ... or walking along a narrow ledge with a vertical drop below." Wall-paintings date from the 13th – 19th centuries CE. All remain in use and many hold paintings, crosses, crowns, sistra, drums and other religious artefacts. Tembien has twenty-eight rock-hewn churches dating largely to the second half of the Middle Ages and are a coherent group in terms of age and function. Many are associated with living monasteries. Many possess important ecclesiastical treasures, especially manuscripts and crosses.

Atsbi to the east is at the eastern edge of the highland plateau and includes twenty-four rock-hewn churches, as well as three very early timber-and-masonry built churches. Among the rock-hewn churches is Mikael Amba, 8th – 10th centuries CE which incorporates important early woodwork; others are Mikael Barka, Mikael Mitsua and Abuna Aregawi Afa'anti. Debra Selam Mikael is a cave church of timber-and-masonry construction with the upper parts and the rear wall carved out of the solid rock, and together with Tcherqos Agabo and Zarema Giyorgis, are amongst the oldest churches in Ethiopia and the oldest timber structures in the world, dating between the 6th and 10th centuries CE. Debra Selam Mikael also has an outstanding and extensive series of wall-paintings, dating to the 11th/12th century.

The Ministry's justification of outstanding universal value for these Sacred Landscapes notes that they incorporate "the largest group of rock-hewn architectural ensembles in the world." The spiritual practices associated with them preserve "in an Ethiopian context a living survival of the oldest forms of Christian monasticism". They exist in a landscape whose integrity has been maintained by the continuation of traditional farming practices, and which have survived without threat from development. The rock-hewn churches retain their original form, design and materials, in their original setting, with few subsequent alterations. They also illustrate successive influences on Ethiopian culture from 4th century Egypt to the Italian Renaissance in the 15th century CE, and provide a testimony to the civilization of medieval Ethiopia.

The area around Hawzien town and the Gheralta mountains appears to have been the scene of considerable fighting for several months.¹²³⁰ One eyewitness account of the activities of Ethiopian and Eritrean troops noted military operations at Hawzien and along the road running past the Gheralta mountains in November 2020.¹²³¹ There were reports in January of "extensive looting" in the Gheralta area, and that

¹²²⁹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6301/>

¹²³⁰ <https://www.eepa.be/> Notice of fighting in or around Hawzien/Hawzen can be found in Situation Reports Nos:148 (18.5.2021), 123 (9.4.2021), 119 (5.4.2021), 96 (3.3.2021), 85 (16.2.2021), 72 (31.1.2021) and 50 (9.1.2021)

¹²³¹ <https://tghat.com/2021/05/01/what-i-witnessed-about-the-war-in-gulle-kilte-awlaelo-tigray/>

Hawzien had been seriously damaged by shell fire. Additional Eritrean troops were said to have appeared in late January, and there was further fighting and indiscriminate bombing of Hawzien in mid-February and early March. Ethiopian and Eritrean troops shelled Hawzien in April with 30 deaths reported. The most recent report was in May when there was “active and random shelling in Hawzien and its vicinity”, and of fighting at the village of Abune Y’ma’eta Guh, closest to one of the best-known of the rock churches, on May 7 between Ethiopian troops and Tigrayan forces. Villagers said after the fighting Eritrean troops arrived the next day and shot 21 of the villagers. 19 died, including 7 children under 10, one a month-old baby. Nine belonged to one family. Four-and-a-half-year-old Samrawit, shot twice in the leg and also attacked with a machete, survived and her father managed to get her to hospital in Mekelle after a two-day journey.¹²³²

Fighting in and around Hawzien poses a direct threat to many nearby churches in the Gheralta area, among the best-known of which are: Abraha wa Atsbha, Debre Tsion (Abune Abraham), Selassie Dugum, Debre Maryam Korkor, Daniel Korkor and Abuna Yemata Guh. Some of these churches are, of course, exceptionally difficult to reach. In the past, their isolation has protected them, but tourism has put them firmly ‘on the map’. They have become a major tourist destination in the last decade or so with the town of Hawzien developing as a tourist centre with hotels and lodges being built in and around the town and along the road, including the highly recommended Gheralta Lodge and Korkor Lodge. The former has reportedly been destroyed. Now the churches are no longer hidden, and fighting in this area puts all of them seriously at risk, particularly with Eritrean and Ethiopian troops under orders to loot and destroy.

A number of archaeological sites have also been affected by the conflict – Mai Adrasha, a pre-Aksumite site at Shire which has been the scene of some heavy fighting. A total of 14 or so archaeological excavations were taking place in Tigray and at least half a dozen, including Beta Samati, Mifsas Bahri, Adi Ketema (Adi Gorazu), Gulo Makeda, Wukro Gaewa, and Yeha, have seen fighting or suffered from looting. Eritrean troops looted Yeha and surrounding villages as well as taking church materials from the nearby Abune Mezraete monastery. There were also reports that the archaeological site had been looted.¹²³³ Yeha and the nearby site of Beta Samati are both of major archaeological importance.

Only nine months before the outbreak of war in Tigray, the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism submitted an application for ‘The Cultural Heritage of Yeha’ to be declared a World Heritage Site to UNESCO, in March 2020. The site includes two monumental buildings, the Grat Be’al Geubri Palace and the Great Temple of Yeha and two cemetery areas, the rock cut shaft tombs of Da’ero Mikael and the tombs of Abiy Addi dating to the early and middle of the first millennium BC.¹²³⁴ The Great Temple of Yeha, whose walls are well preserved up to 14 metres, which

¹²³² <https://www.tghat.com/2021/05/24/a-massacre-in-abuna-yemata-guh-at-the-foot-of-the-famous-rock-hewn-church/>. See also: <https://www.eepa.be/>. Situation report No. 148 (18.5.2021)

¹²³³ <https://www.eepa.be> Situation Report EEPA Horn No.42, 31.12.20; Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 66, 25.21.

¹²³⁴ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6477/>

dates to about the 7th century BC and was dedicated to the god Almaqah.¹²³⁵ It was converted to a monastery in the 6th century CE, the Monastery of Abune Aftsie, one of the Nine Saints who came to the area at the end of the 5th century CE from Syria. The monastery was moved to its nearby present location in the early 20th century. The Palace of Be'al Geubri dating to the 8th century BC, lies close to the north east of the Temple. It measured at least 27 meters high, a multi-storey palace, constructed in wood-stone architecture and is the largest known timber-framed building in East Africa and South Arabia and the oldest example south of the Sahara. It marks the beginning of a long tradition of wood-framed constructions in the region. The Da'ero Mikael rock tombs, seventeen rock-cut graves dating to the first millennium BCE, are believed to have belonged to the rulers who lived at the palace. The other group of nine tombs at Abiy Addi have collective burials and also date to the first millennium BCE.

The Ministry's application points out that Yeha offers early evidence for the emergence of a complex culture in the Northern Horn or in the sub-Saharan Africa in general. It was a "political, religious and cultural Centre of highly centralised complex societies in the early first Millennium BC, the first capital city of the Ethiopia state before its transfer to Aksum." It notes the buildings are of high quality and the Great Temple, one of the best preserved architectural remains in Africa, is the earliest surviving structure in sub-Saharan Africa. It provides unique evidence of the cultural exchanges between Africa and Saudi Arabia, as well as archaeological evidence for metal working and for the introduction of the working of metals, the first evidence for the formation of a centralized state in Ethiopia.

Yeha is at the centre of an area of major tourist and archaeological interest. Only a few miles away is Beta Samati where recent archaeological excavations have produced major discoveries in the last few years. It seems to have been an administrative centre occupied from 8th cent BCE to the 7th cent CE, and excavations have found the complete layout of an ancient basilica, with characteristic Aksumite architectural walls and a Ge'ez inscription probably reading 'for this entrance, Christ be favourable to us'. The site also shows evidence of food preparation, (with the bones of cattle, sheep, goats, dik-dik, donkeys, camels and chickens along with wild birds, as well as t'ef, wheat and barley), metal and glass production, as well as commercial activities and long distant trade, including pottery from the Byzantine empire.¹²³⁶ Beta Samati provides important new evidence of Aksumite and pre-Aksumite societies and the continuity between them. It offers the chance to increase knowledge of Aksum's international trade, the conversion to Christianity and of the end of the Aksumite empire.

There are also other sites beyond Yeha, including Meqaber Ga'ewa, some 90 km to the south east, dating to the 8th to 6th centuries BCE, where there is also a temple, some of whose details are similar to those of Yeha. It again shows links with South

¹²³⁵ <https://www.culthernews.de/the-great-temple-of-yeha-ethiopia/>

¹²³⁶ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/beta-samati-discovery-and-excavation-of-an-aksumite-town/643FA872A5B2F9B5E0E765D850C4A526>

Arabian cultures and the remains, including votive offerings, demonstrate “the convergence of local and South Arabian cultural traditions of the first millennium BC.”

10.4 The concern of international scholars

Scholars around the world have been horrified by the increasing cultural and religious losses in Tigray. It has been called ‘cultural cleansing’, an attempt to literally erase Tigrayan culture. But it is also far more. It is a deliberate effort to destroy the central elements of the cultural heritage not just of Tigray but of Ethiopia, and of the other peoples of Ethiopia, including the Amhara and the Oromo, and of Eritrea. The destruction of the one involves the destruction of the other. Indeed, it also involves the destruction of a substantial element of the world’s cultural heritage. Among the treasures at risk are some of the oldest Christian manuscripts, religious relics, and historic Islamic sites in the world.

The levels of destruction and the seizures of property of all kinds in the towns as Ethiopian and Eritrean troops advanced towards Mekelle, as well as the obvious intent to loot, has raised international alarm over the fate of church treasures. It seems clear that in some cases at least, the pillaging of towns and churches, have been intended to profit those involved. Almost as soon as Eritrean troops were seen in Tigray, there were reports of looted goods turning up on the streets and markets of Asmara. As might be expected, these did not include church treasures nor manuscripts. Valuables seized from religious sites are unlikely to end up on the streets of Asmara; they will go to those more able to benefit from their greater value when sold overseas.

The treatment of churches and other religious sites, however, and the killing of priests has reinforced worries about the possible fate of what amounts, in total, to one of the great treasures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church in Tigray and in Ethiopia, and indeed of Christianity: the collections of Geez manuscripts, found in the churches of Tigray. They have been described as “indispensable sources for scholars of early Christianity, late antique Ethiopia and even early Islam...not only among the earliest complete texts of the Christian scripture, but also [providing] us with a rare glimpse into the language, religion and history of ancient Ethiopia.” One Canadian scholar, Professor Gervers, professor of history at the University of Toronto, stresses they are of the highest importance for Christian culture and the cultural heritage of Judeo-Christianity, and “their loss or displacement would be disastrous”.¹²³⁷

Concern has been growing as more and more reports have detailed the destruction being carried out by Ethiopian and more often by Eritrean troops during the fighting in November and subsequently. An article in the UK’s Daily Telegraph in January said: “Churches and mosques in Ethiopia are being attacked and their sacred treasures looted, with international experts warning of historical vandalism and

¹²³⁷ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-where-are-the-garima-gospels-in-ethiopia-scholars-fear-the-worst-for/>

cultural cleansing".¹²³⁸ The report said there were reports of Christian manuscripts being stolen from churches and monasteries, and burned, some manuscripts as old as the 13th century, and of historic Muslim sites being damaged and looted. Professor Gervers described this as "cultural cleansing;" it appeared "The government and the Eritreans want to wipe out the Tigrayan culture... The looting is about destroying and removing the cultural presence of Tigray... They're emptying the physical evidence of culture from the province." He said there had been reports that around 800 Ge'ez manuscripts had been looted from the Shire region. German academic, Dr. Wolbert Smidt, said the "attacks and battles around, at and nearby such sites, show a very great danger for them". Breaking "the traditional rule of sacred places being absolute sanctuaries", he said, was a tragedy, both for an "already deeply-shocked local population" and the world's heritage. The Telegraph report said it was also believed that artefacts had been stolen from the Al-Nejashi Mosque, including religious manuscripts, books and letters, dating back to the seventh century.¹²³⁹

The humanitarian crisis rightly takes precedence over everything else, but the sacred sites and treasures of Ethiopia that are now at risk are of incalculable value to the history of Christianity and its development and to the people of Ethiopia and their history and culture. Professor Alison Phipps, Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies at Glasgow University, has underlined that: "Attacks on cultural heritage are devastating in the context of war as they speak of the destruction of the soul of a people, of things which have endured through the ancestors."

Professor Catherine D'Andrea, director of the Eastern Tigray archaeological project at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, said the region was "truly blessed with numerous and varied forms of tangible and intangible cultural patrimony".¹²⁴⁰ They include monumental architecture such as the UNESCO world heritage site of Aksum, rock-hewn churches and remains of one of the earliest mosques in Africa. "In addition, there are less visible cultural treasures, including manuscripts, paintings, oral traditions and artefacts held by churches and monasteries scattered throughout rural areas of Tigray. These tend to be not fully documented, so we can't even begin to calculate the potential losses if destroyed or pillaged." Overall, there are believed to be some 4,000 churches and monasteries in Tigray.

The specific threat to cultural and religious buildings was underlined in report in January, written by Alula Tesfay Asfha a lecturer at Mekelle university who specialises in heritage conservation in Tigray.¹²⁴¹ He notes the early invasions under which Tigray suffered conflict, destruction and pillage: Yehudit Gudit, an Agaw queen in the 10th century CE, Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, Emir of Adal in the 16th century, CE, and the Italian invasions of 1894-96 and 1935-41. And goes on: "With

¹²³⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/17/churches-mosques-tigray-vandalised-looted-ethiopian-purge/>

¹²³⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ethiopia-tigray-nejashi-mosque-conflict-damage>

¹²⁴⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/24/fabled-ark-could-be-among-ancient-treasures-in-danger-in-ethiopia-deadly-war>

¹²⁴¹ <https://www.tghat.com/2021/01/26/tigray-heritage-at-risk-due-to-the-ar-on-tigray/>

this historical reality in mind and in light of what we know of the current conflict in Tigray, it is not difficult to determine that the War on Tigray poses a great risk to cultural and religious heritage be it from intentional destruction, as collateral damage, or organised looting. There have been reports and photographic evidence of intentional attacks against buildings (mosques and churches included) and monuments recognized as both local and international historical heritage sites.”¹²⁴²

The prestigious Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies issued an appeal In January for ‘the salvation of the cultural heritage of Tigray’. It was signed by 23 scholars and endorsed by another seventy from around the world. It emphasized the concern of the scholastic and academic community for the “highly endangered and directly affected” cultural property of Tigray. It noted Tigray hosted an “extraordinarily rich cultural heritage that had contributed to the development of the region and the entire country and has increased the visibility of Ethiopia as one of the most vibrant tourist destinations in Africa.” It pointed out there had been extensive progress in recent years in studying and preserving “newly recorded historical artefacts and manuscripts, archaeological sites, new museums, restored historical buildings, paintings and manuscripts, and collections of research data”. It expressed concern over the reports that hostilities had been taking place close to renowned cultural sites and that some might have been plundered and looted, mentioning ‘sites of symbolic importance for all of Ethiopia’ including Yeha, al-Najashi Mosque, the church of Maryam Dengelat, the monastery of Dabra Abbay¹²⁴³, the monastery of Dabra Dammo, and Aksum city, already on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Centre noted reports that manuscripts were being looted from churches and monasteries and the danger that they might now be taken out of Ethiopia to be sold abroad. It appealed for state institutions to do everything possible to protect ‘the cultural property of Tigray’ from further destruction, to investigate reported cases of loss and looting and do everything possible to protect research materials from misappropriation and dispersion. The scholars also called on all parties to refrain from attacking this heritage and to respect the places where it had been preserved. The Centre said it was “increasingly concerned by the effect of the conflict on the cultural heritage of Tigray.” It appealed to all parties “to abstain from attacking the cultural heritage and to respect the integrity of the places, both religious and secular, where this heritage is preserved”.¹²⁴⁴

One of the recent projects of the British Library’s Endangered Archives Program (EAP) was Identifying endangered monastic collections in the Sāharti and Enderta regions of Tigray (Ethiopia) (EAP357).¹²⁴⁵ It aimed to make a survey of the monastic libraries in the Sāharti and Enderta regions, travelling to thirty or so selected churches or monastic sites and documenting the content of each library holding to

¹²⁴² <https://tghat.com/2021/01/26/tigray-heritage-at-risk-due-to-the-ar-on-tigray/>

¹²⁴³ <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/ethiopian-manuscripts-virgin-mary/>

¹²⁴⁴ <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/news/appeal2021.html>

¹²⁴⁵ <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP357> - Identifying endangered monastic collections in the Sāharti and Enderta regions of Tigray (Ethiopia).

identify rare books and collections. The team visited and surveyed 32 sites, finding the majority of the collections were of hymns, liturgical manuscripts, homilies, Psalters, and scriptures (particularly of the Gospels). Three of the libraries consulted had a wide range of theological, philosophical and exegetical works, including rare manuscripts both in Geez and Amharic, but held in poor storage.

Others in the region have become concerned. Five exiled opposition Eritrean organisations at the end of December 2020 called for an end to killings and looting in Tigray by Eritrean Forces.¹²⁴⁶ They said the killings had been accompanied by widespread looting, including centuries-old religious artefacts, by organised groups coordinated from Eritrea. It referred to reports of lorries being sent to accompany Eritrean units whose specific mission was to remove anything of value that they could lay their hands on. This loot was being taken to Eritrea, where most of it was being stockpiled though some was appearing in local markets. The statement said: “These crimes go against Eritrean core values of decency, respect for fellow human beings, honesty and integrity. Theft and looting are frowned upon and thieves treated as ‘outcasts’ in our society. These values are ingrained in Eritrean society and make us who we are. The abuses, looting and killings that are now being perpetrated in Tigray are a clear manifestation of the atrocities our people endured in the hands of President Isaias over the last three decades. They are cowardly, disgusting, abhorrent and shameful acts.” The call was signed by Eritrea Focus; Global Initiative to Empower Eritrean Grassroots Movement; Human Rights Concern Eritrea; Release Eritrea; and Yia Kl (Bayto)-UK.¹²⁴⁷

At the end of January, the Global Society of Tigray Scholars addressed a letter to Audrey Azoulay, Director General of UNESCO, drawing attention to “issues that squarely fall under your good office’s purview and express our deepest concern about the unprecedented damages that are being purposefully and systematically perpetrated on heritage sites across Tigray. We note that what is going on in Tigray is pertinent to many articles featured in the “1972 World Heritage Convention” as well as the “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention 1954”.¹²⁴⁸ The letter notes the “exquisitely carved 1,700 years old monolithic tomb marker obelisks” which risk crumbling if explosions occur nearby. It speaks of the “credible reports of widespread state-sponsored looting and destruction occurring in many locations within the Aksum World Heritage site. It stresses many monuments, archaeological sites, artefacts and ancient manuscripts are focus of looting despite resistance of local people and the clergy, adding that “with Eritrean forces and their Ethiopian enablers apparently determined to ransack Tigray of its precious heritage, almost all sites and antiquities of Tigray face imminent danger and pillage.” They are clearly at risk.

¹²⁴⁶ [A call to stop the killings and looting in Tigray by Eritrean Forces - Eritrea Hub](#)

¹²⁴⁷ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/a-call-to-stop-the-killings-and-looting-in-tigray-by-eritrean-forces/>. www.eritrea-focus.org; www.change.org/p/global-initiative-to-empower-eritrean-grassroots-movement-gieegm-an-urgent-call-to-all-eritreans-worldwide; www.hrc-eritrea.org; www.release-eritrea.org; www.yiakl.uk

¹²⁴⁸ <https://meketetigray.uk/2021/02/08/situation-report-eeepa-horn-no-79-08-february-2021/>

In January, Tigrayan scholars were sure that the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean army and Amhara regional forces were openly engaged in heritage destruction and looting. The situation has only deteriorated further.

Ethiopian Christian manuscripts written in Ge'ez, contain precious and vital information on the history, culture and traditions of Ethiopia. There remain, according to some estimates, over 350,000 Ethiopian Christian manuscripts in Ethiopia, a major proportion of them to be found in Tigray. There has previously been some concern over their state as Ethiopia has no national preservation program to identify, document and assemble valuable monastic collections. Even before the opportunities now offered by civil war and military looting, manuscripts have been disappearing. The Tigray Bureau of Culture and Tourism had been working to compile a list of manuscripts found in some churches and monasteries. But this is neither complete nor exhaustive.

One major item of concern has been the Garima Gospels, an illuminated gospel book in two volumes, kept in the Abba Garima monastery, to the east of Adua in the Mehakelegnaw zone of Tigray. They are of incalculable importance as radio-carbon dating suggests the possibility they might even have actually been written by Abba Garima himself, one of the nine Syrian saints believed to have arrived in Ethiopia around 480 CE. One volume is now dated to between 390-570 CE; and the other to between 530-660 CE.¹²⁴⁹ They are therefore likely to be the world's earliest surviving illuminated Christian manuscripts. Michelle Brown, a former British Library curator, described the Garima Gospels as casting "vital light upon early Christian illuminated manuscript production and the role of sub-Saharan Africa". They offer an example of the lost late antique art of Ethiopia, as well as the Christian East. They are closely related to Syriac, Armenian, Greek, and Georgian gospel books and to the art of late antique ("Coptic") Egypt, Nubia, and Himyar (Yemen), demonstrating how the distinctive Christian culture developed in Aksum, and its links to the late antique Mediterranean world.

The survival of the Garima Gospels has been almost miraculous, not least because the monastery has been in the frontline before. Even if it survived the fall of Aksum unscathed in the 8th century CE, it was probably overrun and looted in the 16th century by Ahmed Gran; in the 1890s the area was subject to Italian invasion; and the main church of the monastery was destroyed by fire in the 1930s. Despite their long history, the manuscript's illuminations remain bright, vibrant and colourful. It suggests they were hidden away in the dark, and only rediscovered fairly recently. Today, they are facing new dangers.

In mid-February, employees of the Mekelle Diocese which includes a total of 45 monasteries, issued a statement which noted that "most of the tangible and intangible heritages registered with UNESCO" were held by the Tigray Orthodox Tewahedo Church and were at "risk of being looted and destroyed". The statement said almost all monasteries and religious schools in Tigray had been bombed or

¹²⁴⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garima_Gospels

shelled. It claimed: “Historic and religious books and archives that belong to different monasteries and churches which are symbols of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and sources of tourism have been looted and destroyed.” This was still continuing. They called upon the Eritrean and Amhara region invaders to stop all atrocities, the looting of public property, artefacts, and treasures, and to leave Tigray immediately. Noting Tigray was the cradle of ancient civilization and religion and was known for being the home of the Ark of the Covenant, they stressed most of the tangible and intangible heritage for Ethiopia registered with UNESCO were from the Tigray Orthodox Tewahedo Church. They called for “the immediate return of artefacts, treasures, and properties looted by the invading Eritrean army and the Amhara forces” and for the “protection of our heritage”, as well as for the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to the priests, deacons, and monks in the monasteries and churches who had been deprived of food and water due to the war.¹²⁵⁰

Some responses have been surprisingly muted. Despite the human rights’ abuses committed in Tigray and the destruction of churches, neither the Patriarchate of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in Addis Ababa, nor the other churches in Ethiopia, have had much to say about events in Tigray. The head of the Roman Catholic Church in Ethiopia, Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel, did send a delegation to investigate the damage to Catholic church facilities in Adigrat in January. The delegation reported that that priests and nuns in a church compound were forced to witness heavy fighting after a church compound had been taken over and used as a military command centre, that the Adigrat seminary building and water tanker were damaged by shelling, a chapel at the cemetery was damaged, and windows of the church school were damaged and broken. It noted that an Orthodox church, a mosque and other church buildings near the Catholic church were damaged. The delegation also reported that offices and classrooms at the Wukro St. Mary’s Catholic College were broken and looted, with laptops and computers stolen, and the solar panel for power taken.

The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, Abune Mathias, has also spoken of the threat to the heritage of Tigray, of the destruction of churches and the killing of priests. His message was recorded on the iPhone of a visitor in April and smuggled out of Addis Ababa. So it was only on 7 May, that in his first public message since the start of the war, he was able to speak of barbaric deeds being committed in Ethiopia and especially in Tigray: “What is happening in Tigray is of the highest brutality and cruelty... Genocide is being committed now, especially [targeting] our civilian brethren.” He spoke of the killing of innocent citizens in cities, villages, homes, the raping of women, the complete looting of Tigrayan property, “aiming at wiping out the people of Tigray”, and of massacres, forced starvation, and of the destruction of churches and looting. “They shoot at churches; they shoot at monasteries, at Aksum, at Debre Damo. The cannon bombardment at Debre Damo is very shocking.... The monks of Waldibba have been driven out of

¹²⁵⁰ <https://meketetigray.uk/2021/03/21/statement-of-the-employees-of-mekelle-diocese-and-of-the-administrators-of-45-monasteries-and-churches/>

their home where they had lived their entire lives and have been dispersed.... It's not just Aksum and Debre Damo; the new church in Asimba, Bahitawi Zewengel, has been hit. In Mariam Denegleat, people who had been praying had been made to fall like leaves outside the church." The Patriarch asks God to strengthen the people of Tigray - "All shall pass, so this too may pass...May God take away all this and bring us an era of peace", before concluding "What has the people of Tigray done, what is its crime, so much so that they strive to wipe it off the face of the earth? Genocide is being committed. The world ought to know."¹²⁵¹

The conflict has caused divisions within the church and the statement by the Patriarch has underlined the divide. Back in mid-November, the Synod of the EOTC publicly announced its support for the 'I stand with the Ethiopian Army campaign' in Tigray launched by the Prime Minister. Since then, the Synod has made no criticism of the destruction of churches, the killing of priests, and religious figures or the impact of the war. Following the statement by the Patriarch, the Holy Synod did hold an emergency meeting but only to distance itself from the Patriarch. The Secretary-General of the Synod, Abune Yosef, gave a press conference to stress that the message of the Patriarch regarding the situation in Tigray did not represent the Holy Synod and to insist that any official Church announcement had to be approved by the general assembly of the Holy Synod. The Patriarch, who is himself from Tigray, did not in fact mention the Synod or the Church.

The failure of the Synod to condemn what has been happening in Tigray, its apparent support for the government's policies in Tigray, and the virtual house arrest of the Patriarch, has led to calls to establish a separate Tigray Orthodox Church. A Global Orthodox Tewahdo Association of Tigrayan Clergies was set up on 21 November, "to enable our [Tigrayan] people to retain their Orthodox Tewahedo religion, [Tigrayan] culture, and history and instil these Tigrayan values into their children, and make every necessary preparation for the establishment of a Church Council of the Tigray Orthodox Tewahido Church of the future state of Tigray."¹²⁵²

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¹²⁵¹ <https://eritreahub.org/abune-mathias-accuses-ethiopian-government-of-genocide-in-tigray-the-taboo-of-taboo-the-despicable-of-despicable-is-being-committed>. See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSkc-XSlwy0&t=712s> (Amharic)

¹²⁵² <https://tghat.com/2021/04/17/ethiopian-orthodox-churchs-betrayal-and-the-rebirth-of-the-tigray-orthodox-church/>; see also <https://meketetigray.uk/2021/03/08/the-war-on-tigray-heightens-schism-in-the-ethiopian-orthodox-church/>

- Felicity Mulford - Hillary Rodham Clinton scholar, Swansea University
- Habte Hagos - Fellow of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and Chairman of Eritrea Focus
- Kjetil Tronvoll is the Director of Oslo Analytica, as well as Professor and Research Director of Peace and Conflict studies at Bjorknes University College, Oslo.
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- Martin Plaut - Senior Research Fellow Kings' College London and former Africa Editor, BBC World Service News
- Sally Keeble - Former Labour MP for Northampton North and a Minister in the Department for International Development

12. About Eritrea Focus

Founded in 2014, Eritrea Focus is an association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), human rights organisations, exile and refugee groups and individuals concerned with the gross abuses of human rights in Eritrea. The objective of Eritrea Focus is to draw attention to the horrific abuses and suffering of Eritreans, both within the country and as refugees living abroad. We campaign for democratic accountability in Eritrea and the establishment of the rule of law, and actively engage with the international community in our efforts to achieve this.

13. Oslo-Analytica

Oslo Analytica is an independent research and consultancy company, registered in Norway. Oslo Analytica offers bespoke analysis and programming to governmental and multilateral agencies as well as the private sector. Provided services include research, teaching/training, policy analysis, and process support, within areas of conflict and peace, risk assessments, democratisation, human rights, governance, and due diligence processes.

14. Abbreviations

- ALF: Afar Liberation Front
- APDP: Afar People's Democratic Party
- APPG: UK All-Party Parliamentary Group
- APP: Afar People's Party

- ARDUF: Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front
- AU: African Union
- BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation
- B-GPDUF: Benishangul Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front
- BPLM: Benishangul Gumuz People's Liberation Movement
- Derg: Military government that ruled Ethiopia 1974- 1987
- EDF: Eritrean Defence Force
- EDP: Ethiopian Democratic Party
- EFFORT: Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray
- EHRC: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
- ENDF: Ethiopian National Defence Forces
- EOTC: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
- EPLF: Eritrean People's Liberation Front
- EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
- EPRP: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party's
- ERA: Eritrean Relief Association
- ESAT: Ethiopian Satellite Television station
- EU: European Union
- EZEMA: Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice
- G7: Group of Seven
- ICC: International Criminal Court
- IDP: Internally Displaced Person
- IPC: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
- METEC: Metals and Engineering Corporation
- NAMA: National Movement of Amhara
- NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations
- OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

- ONLF: Ogaden National Liberation Front
- OLA: Oromo Liberation Army
- PG7: Patriotic Gimbot 7
- PFDJ: Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice [successor to the EPLF]
- PP: Prosperity Party
- PSNP: Productive Safety Net Program
- REST: Relief Society of Tigray
- RRC: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
- RSADO: Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation
- TDF: Tigray Defence Force
- TDA: Tigray Development Associated
- TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front
- TSF: Tigray Special Forces
- UAE: United Arab Emirates
- UN: United Nations
- UNEOE: UN Emergency Office for Ethiopia
- UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
- UNHCR: United Nations High Commission for Refugees
- US: United States of America

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