

Introduction

The war on Tigray is essentially the revenge of the Eritrean president, Isais Afwerki. It is the outworking of a grudge against the Tigrayan leadership that is rooted in differences in orientation both during the liberation struggle and thereafter, which include the 1998-2000 border war.

Eritrea continues to occupy parts of Tigray close to its border. Eritrean troops are also fighting in Oromia, and are stationed across the rest of Ethiopia, with Eritrean agents operating throughout the country. Through its actions in Tigray, Eritrea has also put on open display the true nature of its secretive ruling regime by exporting the violations Eritreans have suffered for 30 years under a general shroud of secrecy.

Despite the Ethiopian government's protestations of solely targeting the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and its strongholds, it is clear that Tigrayan civilians are being subjected to collective punishment, having been deemed guilty by association due to their shared ethnicity with TPLF leaders. Ethiopian, Eritrean, Somali troops and allied Amhara militia have attacked civilians and civilian objects in a manner that indicates an intentional effort to dismantle and destroy a people group, its history, and its land.

Communications were disabled once the conflict began, effectively obscuring the egregious manner in which the war was unfolding, and they remain relatively restricted. However, the news that continues to seep out of Tigray has been consistently alarming.

Since the start of the war in November 2020 Tigrayan men and boys were regularly the targets of extrajudicial killings and mass summary executions. Mass rape is being used as a weapon of war and it appears to have been committed with genocidal intent, with additional injuries deliberately inflicted on the victims with nails, sticks and hot rods aimed at [preventing them from bearing children](#). Nuns were [raped in their convent](#). Furthermore, starvation continues to be weaponised as Ethiopia and its allies continue to enforce a humanitarian aid blockade which has been ongoing since July 2021, and which is unprecedented in the history of recent conflict.

There are worrying indications that atrocity crimes (war crimes, crimes against humanity and possibly genocide) may have occurred and may still be underway. In the words of a [priest](#) from the Catholic Eparchy of Adigrat interviewed at the height of the occupation: 'They want to annihilate Tigray. By killing the men and boys, they are trying to destroy any future resistance...They are raping and destroying women to ensure that they cannot raise a community in the future. They are using rape and food as weapons of war.'

Targeting of religious and historical sites

Tigray is home to thousands of culturally significant artefacts, monuments, and archaeological sites, and has an ancient heritage that is of significance to the three

Abrahamic religions. However, its world heritage sites and places of worship have not been spared, amidst reports of the "[major looting](#) of Tigrayan cultural heritage, particularly ancient manuscripts and ecclesiastical service objects, from countless ancient churches."

- The al Nejashi mosque, one of the oldest in Africa, was damaged by shelling in November 2020, and letters and manuscripts dating back to the 7th century were [looted](#) by Eritrean troops, who also damaged historic graves;
- Saint Amanuel Orthodox Church, situated close to the al Nejashi mosque, also sustained damage after being hit by 17 tank shells;
- In Axum, a World Heritage Site, Eritrean soldiers reportedly fired at St. Michael's Church repeatedly to destroy it in November 2020, according to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. In addition, looting by Eritrean troops reportedly [continued for three days](#);
- On 17 November Abuna Aregawi Church in Shire town was damaged by shelling;
- On 25 November Ethiopian troops shelled the grounds of St. George's Church in Wukro, damaging its facade, along with several smaller buildings within its compound;
- Twenty six monastic cells were destroyed when the renowned 6th Century monastery on the Debre Damo mountain was shelled for over 9 hours on 11 January 2021. It was subsequently stormed and looted on 12 and 14 January by Eritrean soldiers;
- The newly constructed Aba Zewengel Church of Maebino Holy Cross monastery was [reportedly](#) destroyed;
- In December 2020 Eritrean soldiers reportedly attacked and looted a historic mosque near the town of Nebelet, before shelling and damaging the building;
- The rock-hewn churches in the Gheralta mountains were reportedly damaged by shelling;
- The [Cherkos Church](#) in Zalambesa was shelled and looted;
- According to the Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia, a museum of artefacts from the pre-Christian era was partially damaged and looted, while medieval manuscripts were reportedly burnt;
- A delegation from the Ethiopian Catholic Church that visited its Diocese of Adigrat in mid-January to check on the welfare of the bishop reported that the church's compound had been [used as a military command centre](#) despite the presence of clergy and nuns, and that the Adigrat minor seminary building, its water tanker, a chapel at the cemetery, an Orthodox church and a mosque all sustained damage;
- In January 2022 [allegations](#) began to emerge of violations committed by Somali troops, who were station in Tigray between early December 2020 and late February 2021, and who are reported to have resided in churches, and burned holy books and sacred objects.
- Also in January, a church was reportedly damaged as the Ethiopian government resumed airstrikes that have

largely targeted civilian objects.

“[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.”

The indiscriminate bombing and destruction of ancient churches, mosques and other religious establishments and extensive looting of irreplaceable historical artefacts and manuscripts, is a catastrophic loss both for Tigray, and for world heritage.

Not only do these attacks violate customary international humanitarian law, according to the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#), “[i]ntentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, [or] historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives,” and “pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault” also constitute war crimes.

Extrajudicial killings of clergy and worshippers

Clergy and worshipers have died in significant numbers, as many [attacks appear to have been timed to coincide with services](#). “Up to the 4th of May 2021, the total number of religious leaders killed during their religious service are more than 326.” This number includes Muslim leaders. Many of the attacks on churches appeared to be timed to coincide with religious festivals, possibly to inflict maximum casualties:

- Eighty people - both Christian and Muslim- were [reportedly killed](#) between 24 and 25 November 2020, when the Al-Nejashi Mosque (see above) was shelled, vandalised, and looted;
- The event which brought the plight of world heritage sites into sharp focus internationally also involved the massacre by Eritrean troops of some 700 people at the Maryam Zion Church in Axum, which is believed to house the Ark of the Covenant, between 28 and 29 November 2020;
- On 20 December 2020 CSW received allegations of the deaths in late November 2020 of 154 civilians, including a priest named Hailu Abraha, by [Eritrean troops](#) who attacked the Maryam Dengelat Church near Adigrat during the feast of Tsion Mariam, opening fire as worshippers were celebrating mass;
- Eritrean soldiers killed the two guardians of the historic mosque near Nebelet which they attacked in December 2020;
- On 9 January, eight Ethiopian soldiers interrupted the celebration of the birth of the Virgin Mary at Adi’Zeban

Karagiorgis Church, arrived, seized 12 deacons aged between 15 and 20, took them out, and [shot them](#);

- A dozen Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers entered the [Gergera Maryam](#) church, walked into the room where six priests were praying, and opened fire, killing five of them;
- One monk was killed during the 9-hour shelling of the Debre Damo monastery on 11 January by Eritrean troops, who appear to have been informed that TPLF fighters were hiding there;
- In late January 2021, reports emerged of the murders of around 48 Orthodox priests in a church in Adi Fetaw village, close to the Eritrean border, and of 24 priests in Edaga Arbi.
- Details also emerged of the murders of 27 people, including 12 priests, in Medhane Alem Church in Gulomikhada, by Eritrean soldiers who timed their attack to coincide with the annual feast day on 5 January. Sixteen people in the adjacent villages of Firedashum and Ara’iro, were also killed, including 6 priests and 3 deacons.
- According to a statement issued [on 17 February 2021](#) by the employees of Mekelle Diocese and the administrators of 45 monasteries and churches, almost every monastery and religious school in Tigray had been bombed by drones and heavy weapons, and “a lot of clergymen, deacons, congregation members of Sunday schools, religious students, and children, especially those clergymen who were on religious service were massacred like animals.”
- A document sent to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church dated [15 April 2021](#) stated that a number of mass killings had occurred over the preceding five months in which around 78 clergy were massacred in just one zone of the region. According to eyewitnesses the murders occurred at the Gergera Maryam, Adi’Zeban Karagiorgis, Kidanemihret Bosa, Taksa churches, the Abune Ayzgi monastery and other sites
- Yeha monastery was reportedly looted by Eritrean troops, while [Qheretsa Mariam](#) in the district of Samre, was bombed by the Ethiopian Air Force. Both sites are of historical and religious significance.
- Survivors reported in January 2022 that Somali troops had [targeted and decapitated priests](#) without mercy. “Churches became the most unsafe places. Villagers stopped going to churches because the Somali troops would kill anyone they found in churches.”

According to the Rome Statute, wilfully killing; wilfully causing great suffering; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population or against individual civilians who are not playing a direct part in hostilities; intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge it will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians, committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, or other forms of sexual violence; and the intentional weaponizing of starvation as weapon of war by depriving civilians “of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding

relief supplies, amount to war crimes.”

In addition, murder, and extermination – which “includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population” – constitute crimes against humanity.

Echoes of Eritrea

The seemingly “[intentional destruction of markers of Tigrayan identity](#)” is attributed by some observers to efforts to enhance [an Amhara claim to the Axumite legacy](#), in which the Orthodox Church, its unique written language, and Ethiopia’s imperial history are rooted.

The wanton disregard shown to faith communities and sites of spiritual and historical importance also reflects the Eritrean government’s attitude towards religious and belief communities in its own country, some of whom are deemed by a [UN Commission of Inquiry](#) to have suffered the crime of religious and/or ethnic persecution at the hands of a regime whose officials were found to have been committed crimes against humanity since 1991.

For example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the guardian of ancient Christian traditions and ostensibly one of three denominations sanctioned to operate in the country, has seen its legitimate patriarch, Abune Antonios, removed uncanonically, placed under house arrest officially in 2017, supposedly [excommunicated](#) and replaced in 2021 for the second time by an unrecognised bishop. Church finances, assets and artefacts have been seized, monasteries forcibly closed, and monks and priest imprisoned, conscripted, or forced to flee.

In the case of Ethiopia, it became clear that the Orthodox patriarch, Abuna Mathias, who in the past was celebrated for speaking out against repression and injustice, was effectively being silenced when a smuggled video was released in May 2021 in which he [described events in Tigray as genocide](#), highlighted atrocities and called for urgent international intervention. The patriarch was immediately deemed guilty by association by dint of his Tigrayan ethnicity and was officially placed under house arrest.

Recommendations

The violence in Tigray is systematic and intentional, with all signs pointing to the possibility that a genocide may be occurring before the eyes of an international community that continues to respond far too tentatively. In June 2021 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [warned](#) that 900,000 Tigrayans faced famine conditions. Over six months later, consistent, sufficient humanitarian access remains elusive, raising fears that a catastrophic man-made famine is well be underway. CSW therefore urges:

The UK government and other Members of United Nations (UN) Security Council:

- To institute a no fly zone over the Tigray and Oromo

regions of Ethiopia. There are no prospects for an end to the conflict while Ethiopia believes that the advantage of airpower will offset Tigrayan superiority in battlefield prowess, and will ultimately deliver victory;

- To act swiftly to ensure an immediate cessation of hostilities, the departure of Eritrean forces from Tigray and Oromia, unimpeded access to all of Tigray for local and international aid agencies, and the convening of an inclusive national dialogue. The imposition of an arms embargo on all identified warring parties, would be an important initial step towards achieving these goals;
- To work with the African Union to create a hybrid peacekeeping force, mandated to protect civilians, and enforce a ceasefire; and with the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, to promote and support peace, security, stability through an inclusive political dialogue;
- To prioritise justice by ensuring implementation of the recommendations of the 2016 report of the UN Commission of inquiry on Eritrea (COIE), and to:“(a) Determine that the situation of human rights in Eritrea poses a threat to international peace and security; (b) Refer the situation in Eritrea to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; (c) Impose targeted sanctions, namely travel bans and asset freezes, on persons where there are reasonable grounds to believe that the said persons are responsible for crimes against humanity or other gross violations of human right.”

The UK government, in the event of continuing paralysis within the Security Council:

- To urgently consider the imposition of sanctions on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who bear ultimate responsibility for human rights violations committed with impunity by their respective armed forces, as well as on military and political leaders of both nations identified as being complicit in these violations; and encourage other nations with the requisite domestic legislation the (US, EU, Canada) to do the same.
- To take the lead in international efforts, including at the UN Security Council, to ensure no fly zones over Tigray and Oromia, an immediate cessation of hostilities, the complete departure of Eritrean forces, and unimpeded access to Tigray for local and international aid agencies. The imposition of an arms embargo on all identified warring parties would be an important initial step in achieving these aims;
- To work with the African Union to create a hybrid peacekeeping force, mandated to protect civilians, and enforce a ceasefire; and with the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, to promote and support peace, security, stability through an inclusive political dialogue;
- To lead efforts at the UN Security Council to implement the recommendations of the 2016 report of the UN Commission of inquiry on Eritrea (COIE), and to: “(a) Determine that the situation of human rights in Eritrea poses a threat to international peace and security;

- (b) Refer the situation in Eritrea to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; (c) Impose targeted sanctions, namely travel bans and asset freezes, on persons where there are reasonable grounds to believe that the said persons are responsible for crimes against humanity or other gross violations of human rights;”
- To take the lead in combating the illicit antiquities trade, assisting the cataloguing and registration of looted artefacts with the INTERPOL Database of Stolen Works of Art and UNESCO Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws.